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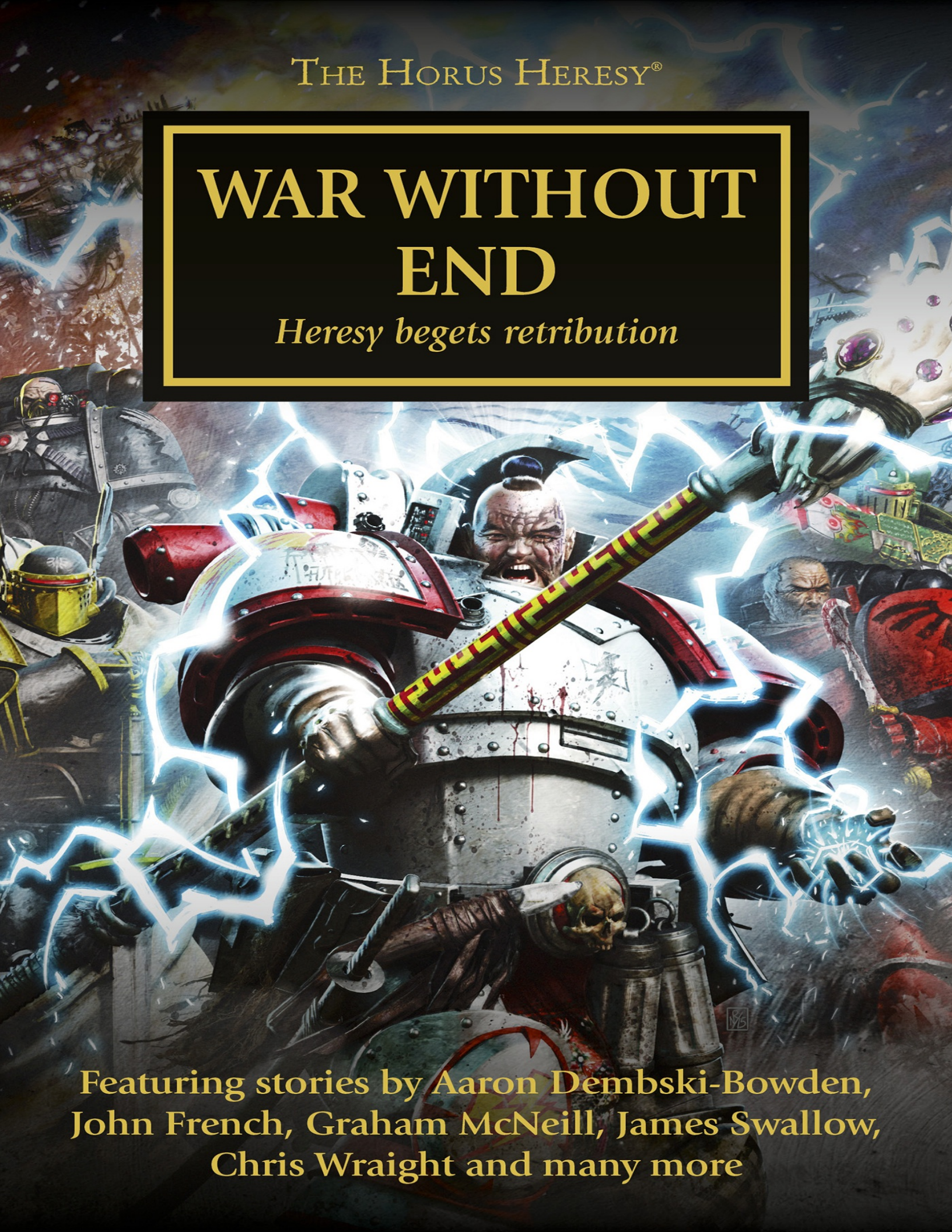

Featuring stories by Aaron Dembski-Bowden, John French, Graham McNeill, James Swallow, Chris Wraight and many more

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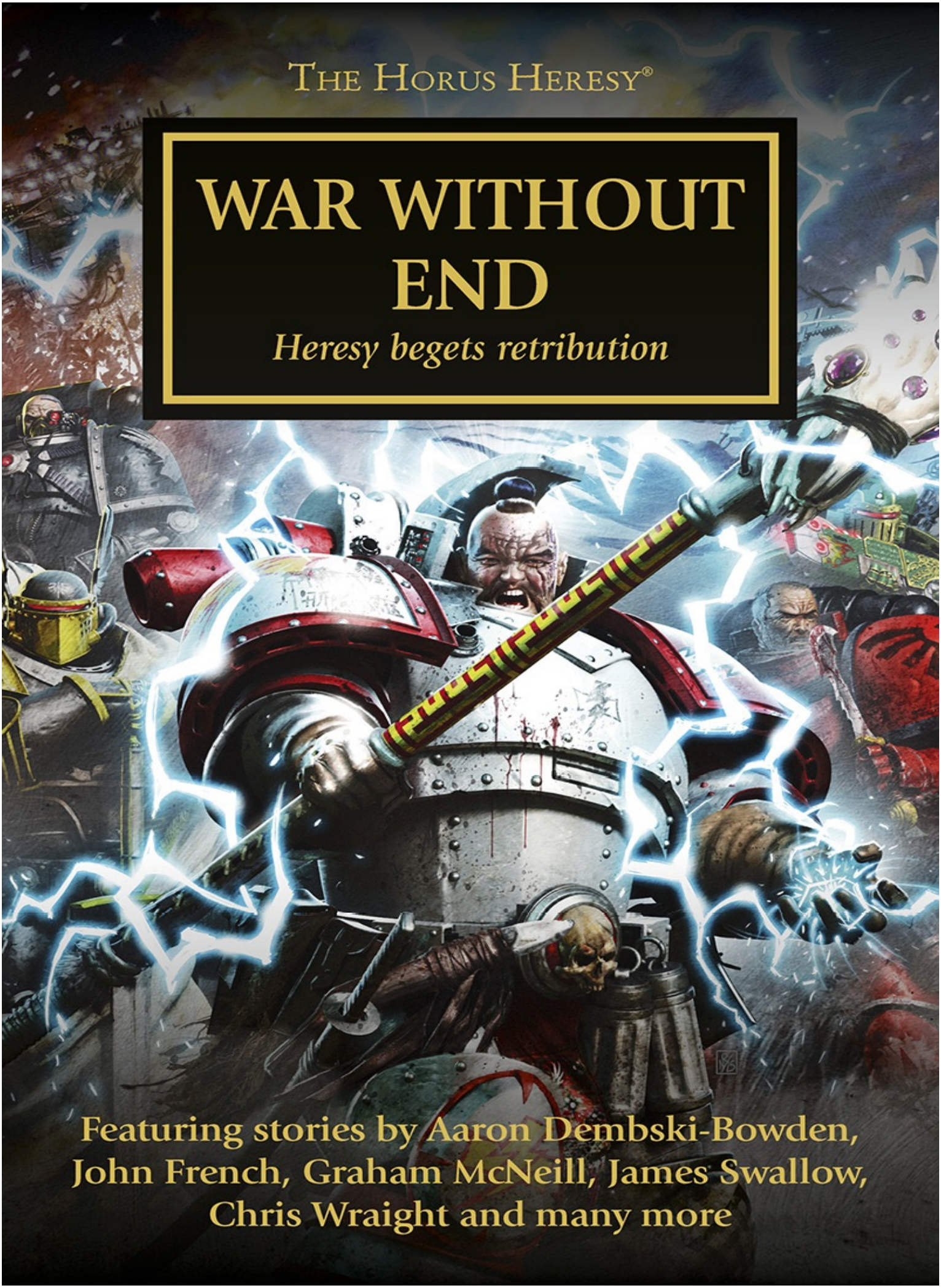

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The Horus Heresy®

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

THE DEVINE ADORATRICE

Graham McNeill

Slender tendrils of fragrant smoke drifted from fang-mouthed oil burners, filling the bed-chamber with a delicious mix of cinnamon and honeysuckle. A fine sheen of oiled sweat and perfumed breath completed the indulgent atmosphere. Early morning sunlight shone in golden streaks through the slatted timber louvres over the windows, spilling languidly over the breathless couple that lay in the sumptuous bed, their eyes unfocused, their limbs entwined and their minds blissfully self-absorbed.

Three bottles of fine Caeban wine sat on a handmade table beside the bed, and red stains all across the sheets were testament to the wildness of its consumption. Raeven slipped his arm from Lyx's shoulders and traced a finger over the coiled tattoo behind her ear that was normally hidden by her auburn hair.

'Do you know how much trouble you'd be in if anyone saw that?' he asked.

'You've seen it,' she replied.

'Yes, but I'm not going to report you for a cult tattoo.'

'Then why should I worry?' she said with a grin. 'You're the only one who gets to see it.'

'Not even Albard?'

'*Especially* not Albard,' she laughed, but he saw through her levity.

'You're not really mixed up with the Serpent cult are you?'

Lyx shook her head and kissed him. 'Can you really imagine me dancing naked in the forest?'

'I am now. Is that what they do?'

'That's what they say,' said Lyx. 'That, and sacrifice virgins and mate with nagas.'

Raeven made a disgusted face. Like most people, he'd heard the rumours about the vile practices of the Serpent cult – their misguided belief in old gods and their abhorrence of all forms of authority. And like most people, he'd dismissed them as just that, rumours.

'Anything left to drink?' asked Lyx.

He reached over her to examine the bottles. All were empty, and he slumped back onto the bed with a sigh.

'No, it's all gone.'

'We drank it *all*?' asked Lyx, turning onto her side. She gave him a full-lipped smile as the movement pulled the sheets down her body. Raeven took a moment to savour the nut-brown colour of her flesh and the way it rose in goosebumps in the chill air of the high bedchamber.

'I'm afraid so,' he said.

'That explains why my head feels like one of your father's pet nagas is squeezing it.'

Raeven rubbed his eyes and ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. Like Lyx, his skin was the colour of young oak, ridged by cut lines of defined musculature. He was slender where his brother was bulky, and toned where Albard could only generously be described as 'stocky'.

With nothing nearby to drink, Raeven reached up and pulled down a coiled pipe of leathery azhdarchid skin and sucked upon the copper end piece, until the smouldering embers in the bowl on the shelf above

the headboard took light. He puffed a stream of aromatic smoke into the air, making a pillow of his arm.

'I doubt if old Oruboros or Shesha could even break an egg open, these days,' he said at last. 'It's a stupid comparison to make.'

'You know what I mean,' she pouted.

'I do, but you're prettier when you're sad.'

'That must be why you're so cruel to me.'

'One of the many reasons,' agreed Raeven, letting the soothing effects of the smoke ease away the disquiet he always felt when he woke in the same bed as Lyx. As enticing as her bodily charms and paramour's skills were, he couldn't quite rid himself of the feeling that there was something unnatural about their...

Their what? *Lovemaking*? Hardly, since there was little love lost between them.

Rutting had something of a ring to it, in that it perfectly encapsulated the frenetic violence of their coupling, but didn't quite express the frisson he took from its taboo nature. Raeven glanced over at the ring on Lyx's finger and almost laughed as his genhanced eyes read the betrothal inscription laser-etched upon its platinum surface.

'What's funny?' asked Lyx.

'Nothing,' he said. 'I just caught a glimpse of the vow Albard had inscribed on your ring.'

She pulled her hand below the sheets, and her face flushed. She shrugged.

'It's a nice ring, and you insist I keep it on.'

'Yes,' said Raeven, letting the smoking pipe coil back up to the bowl. 'I like to know what I'm defiling.'

She smiled and reached over to pull him towards her. Her fingers brushed over the steel-rimmed sockets bored through the meat of his body at his neck and spine. He saw her flinch at the cold, metallic presence in his skin, and took a moment to savour the look of distaste that flashed in her eyes.

'You don't like them?' he asked.

'No, they're cold.'

'You should be used to that by now,' said Raeven, pushing her down onto the bed. He leaned down to kiss her, but she turned her head to the side.

'Did it hurt?' she asked. 'When the Sacristans cut you open, I mean?'

Still supporting himself on his elbows, Raeven nodded. 'Yes. The Sacristans had us immobilised with muscle inhibitors, but father decided we would undergo the surgery without the benefit of pain-blockers, just like they did in his day. We were paralysed, but awake the whole time.'

She flinched at the thought of being cut open by the iron-faced priests of Mars and their lickspittle Sacristans. Raeven felt his jaw clench at the memory of the procedure, strapped in a bronze gurney in the depths of the Sanctuary as he and Albard faced each other across the expanse of bottle-green ceramic tiles and sterile steel.

'I suspect father expected me to scream, but I was damned if I'd give him the satisfaction.'

'What do they feel like now?' she said, probing the edges of the sockets in his flesh and sliding her fingers inside, despite her avowed distaste. So like her to express squeamishness one moment, naked interest the next. She'd been like that the first time he'd taken her to his bed, pleading with him that what they were doing was wrong, but coming back night after night for more of the same.

'They feel like part of me,' he said with a shrug. 'Like they've always been a part of me.'

'Albard's are infected,' said Lyx, rubbing the skin around the neural connector, and Raeven saw her breathing was becoming heavier. 'He has me rub counterseptic poultices on them several times a day.'

'Does he like that?'

She shook her head. 'No, he hates it.'

‘Good,’ said Raeven, kissing her and feeling her body respond to his touch.

Later, with Lyx asleep, Raeven slid from his bed and padded softly across the floor of his chambers. This high in the valley, the air was cold, but thick mallahgra pelts hunted by his grandfather in the jungles of Kush kept his feet pleasantly warm. Sweat cooled rapidly on his skin, and he pulled a sea-green robe edged in xenosmilus fur around his naked body. Beyond the louvres, he could hear the sound of the city preparing for the day’s celebrations – the excited hubbub of tens of thousands of voices.

Though Raeven was hundreds of metres above the city in one of the three Devine Towers, he fancied he could still hear the cosmopolitan mix of accents as the people gathered there came from all across the world to honour the Becoming of Lord Devine’s sons. Merchants from Loquash would be haggling with the painted men of Aenatep. Artisans of the Clockwork City would unveil their ticking, mechanical marvels – hoping to avoid the attentions of the Sacristan Guard – while the various Houses would no doubt be parading the best and bravest of their knights, boasting of their great hunts and the productivity of their satrapies. And the people of Lupercalia would bear this intrusion of so many thousands to their city with the stoic surety that not one of the newcomers could hold a candle to House Devine.

Raeven pulled back the heavy drapes and pushed out through the louvred shutters to the stone-walled balcony beyond, as though the city were his and his alone.

The stepped expanse stretched out before him, filling the width of the valley from one side to the other and cascading down its length to the fertile plains below. Colourful structures of every conceivable shape, size, height and orientation jostled for space amid streets that bore the qualities of the Emperor’s Legions that had brought this world back into the embrace of the Imperium.

Where the Lion had raised the Dawn Citadel in the tapering reaches of the upper valley, the streets around it were rigidly arranged in an unbending grid pattern. And where local geography interfered with that plan, it had been engineered away by the Mechanicum. Lower down, the streets were woven together like intricate knotwork, the free-flowing yet ordered nature of this street-plan said to be a representation of Lord Horus’s war-making. The Khan had chosen not to make his mark in stone, and had instead taken himself into the wild places and high mountains. No one knew exactly what legacy the primarch of the White Scars had left, though fireside tales whispered that he had spoken of secret things to the tribes and noble Houses that existed at the edges of the world.

The one portion of unity amid the chaotic nature of the city’s plan was the Via Argentum, a laser-straight processional that climbed the length of the valley from its wide-mouthed opening to the rocky fortress built into the ochre stone of the mountain. Raeven held a hand over his eyes and looked up at the artfully shaped peak, less a geological feature than a man-made statement carved into the face of the world.

Arms slipped around his waist, and Raeven smelled the jasmine oil Lyx liked rubbed onto her skin. He could feel that she was naked, and he wondered if he had time to take her back to bed before his mother came to fetch him.

‘Are you nervous?’ she asked.

He looked at the marbled dome of the citadel, the early morning sun catching the copper banding between the coffered azure panels. He shook his head, angry that she might think him afraid of what this day promised.

‘No,’ he said, pushing her away. ‘I have been prepared for the Ritual of Becoming since my tenth summer. I know who I am, and I’m ready for whatever happens. If a dullard like father can go through it, then I don’t think I’ll have any trouble.’

‘I heard that the firstborn of House Tazkhar died and that his three brothers went mad after they went through it.’

‘House Tazkhar?’ sneered Raeven. ‘What do you expect from nomadic dung-burners who can’t even build a proper city? Some shit-smeared shaman masquerading as a Sacristan probably poured holy naga venom into their neural connectors.’

‘You shouldn’t get angry,’ said Lyx. ‘You need to be calm. The Throne Mechanicum imprint is based on your neural state at the moment of connection.’

Raeven rounded on her and laughed, a bitter bark of derision.

‘And you’re a Mechanicum priest now, are you? What other pearls of wisdom do you have for me, or does your insight only stretch to the blindingly obvious?’

Lyx pursed her lips. ‘You are in a foul mood this morning.’

‘I am what you make me,’ he returned. ‘I always have been.’

Lyx’s hand flashed out to slap him, but gene-manipulation in the male bloodline of House Devine over the centuries ensured that Raeven’s reaction speed was far faster than hers. He caught her hand and twisted the arm savagely around her back. He pushed her back into the room and threw her face-down upon the bed. She turned to face him as he opened his robe, her expression the same mixture of revulsion and devotion she’d worn since childhood.

Before he could do more, the door to his chamber opened and a statuesque woman in a flowing dress of iridescent scales swept imperiously within. She wore a headdress of nagahide, and a number of venom-blinded servants followed in her wake, each bearing a selection of outfits for him to choose from.

‘Mother!’ said Raeven, planting his hands on his hips and sighing in exasperation. ‘Don’t you knock anymore?’

Cebella Devine shook her head and wagged an admonishing finger. ‘What mother needs to knock at her son’s door on the day of his Becoming?’

‘Clearly not you,’ said Raeven.

‘Hush now,’ said Cebella, running an elongated fingernail across the sculpted lines of his chest. ‘You don’t want to be angry with me. Not today, of all days.’

‘Spare me, mother,’ snapped Raeven. ‘Lyx has already given me the benefit of her extensive knowledge on the matter.’

Cebella’s expression hardened and she turned to face the young girl on the bed, who stared back at her with withering contempt.

‘Get dressed, Lyx,’ said Cebella. ‘It is inappropriate for you to be here today.’

‘Just today?’ Lyx laughed.

‘If you plan to be Raeven’s Adoratrice consort, you need to start acting like one.’

‘Like you are to Cyprian?’ hissed Lyx, her fingers curled into fists. ‘I hardly think so.’

‘Get out,’ said Cebella, her face a granite mask. ‘Albard will be here soon. Take the servants’ tunnels and don’t let me see you until after matters are concluded.’

‘With pleasure,’ said Lyx, visibly controlling her fury and gathering up her clothes. She slipped them on with practiced speed and, fully attired, sashayed to Raeven’s side to plant a kiss on his cheek. ‘Until later.’

Cebella snapped her fingers and said, ‘Someone open the drapes. This room smells like a brothel.’

‘Well, you’re the expert there,’ Lyx muttered, throwing a final barb and darting past Cebella to vanish though the door.

‘Right,’ said Cebella, turning her critical gaze upon her son. ‘Let’s see if we can make you vaguely presentable.’

Several hours later, clothed in expensive silks of black and ocean green, layered sashes of crimson and

blue, and tight-fitting cream trousers tucked into knee-high riding boots with tall heels, Raeven followed his mother down the full height of the tower. She was reciting a list of the various dignitaries who were here to mark his and Albard's Becoming. He tuned her out, thinking back to the night he'd spent with Lyx. As always, the memory stimulated a curious mix of shame and pleasurable guilt.

When they reached the grand hall at the base of the tower, his mother turned her matriarchal countenance upon him and said, 'Have you been listening to a word I've said?'

'Not really,' he confessed, hearing the swelling sounds of cheering and celebration from the streets beyond the tower.

Before Cebella could berate him for his ignorant behaviour, a host of armed warriors swept into the hall, heavy brutish men, armed with a variety of ferocious-looking armaments designed to kill in a myriad of painful ways. Leading the warriors was a man clad in a heavy suit of gleaming silver fusion armour – the kind a man five centuries ago might have worn on the back of a horse, had he found one strong enough to bear him.

He was powerful and broadly built, jowly where his youthful physique was finally yielding to his father's genetics. The right side of his face was knotted with burn scars that had healed poorly over the years and his right eye had been replaced with an augmetic implant after a hunt for a rogue mallahgra had ended badly and its furious charge broke open his skull.

Albard Devine, firstborn scion of House Devine, shook his head at Raeven's attire. 'You are not war-clad.'

'Keenly observant as always, brother,' agreed Raeven with a curt bow.

'Why are you dressed like that?' demanded Albard.

His brother formed his words with great deliberation, as the hideous scarring made him sound like a simpleton if he spoke too quickly. Every time Raeven saw him, it reminded him how glad he was to be younger than Albard and thus spared the ritualistic burning of the firstborn male heir's face upon his coming of age.

'I am dressed like this,' said Raeven, 'because it's ridiculous that we need to wear that outdated armour all the way up to the citadel just to take it off again. Those reactors are so old, they're probably leaking radiation into your bones. Mark my words, you'll regret wearing that clanking monstrosity when you're trying to sire an heir.'

'The men of Devine have worn the argent plate since we first rose to rule this world,' said his brother, stepping in close and glaring at him. 'You will not dishonour our father by disrespecting their memory. You will wear the silver.'

Raeven shook his head. 'No, I think I'm fine the way I am.'

Albard's nose wrinkled in disgust as the scent of the fragrant oils worked through Raeven's hair finally reached him. Raeven saw a glint of recognition, and suppressed the urge to gloat at the thought of his brother recognising his wife's oils.

'You smell like you've been out whoring all night,' said Albard, circling around him.

'Well, now that you mention it, there *was* a lucky young lady...' said Raeven.

His brother's gauntleted hand snapped out to strike him. Raeven swayed aside.

'Come now, brother,' he said. 'You're nowhere near fast enough to hit me anymore.'

Albard looked past him to Cebella, and Raeven hid a smile as he saw the depths of hatred and decades of mutual loathing that passed between them.

'This is your doing,' said Albard. 'Your viper's tongue has made your son a cocksure lout.'

'Albard, my son–' began Cebella.

Raeven's brother cut her off with a bark of anger. 'You are not my mother, witch. My mother is dead and

you are just the whore that shares my father's bed and gives me unwanted siblings.'

The warriors behind Albard stiffened in expectation of Raeven's response. They knew him well enough to understand that he was not a man to be underestimated. Raeven's carefully cultivated air of urbane condescension and louche behaviour concealed a warrior of considerable skill, and many a foolish noble had only discovered that on the end of a charnobal duelling sabre.

'Careful, Albard,' said Raeven. 'A man could take offence at such an insult to his mother.'

His brother at least appreciated that he'd crossed a line, but it wasn't in Albard to apologise; another trait he shared with their father.

'Shall we get this over with, then?' said Raeven, marching past Albard and his entourage of heavily armed warriors. 'Father will be waiting.'

Cheering crowds lined the Via Argentum as the carriage drew them higher up the valley. Thousands of men and women thronged the streets around the processional route, and thousands more packed the rooftops and windows overlooking it. Raeven waved to his people, blowing kisses to the girls and punching the air with his fist for the men. Both gestures were pure pantomime, but no one seemed to care.

'Do you have to do that?' said Albard. 'This is supposed to be a momentous occasion.'

'Says who?' replied Raeven. 'Father? All the more reason for it.'

Albard didn't reply, and remained seated, staring stoically from the open-topped skimmer carriage as it plied its stately path uphill. An entire regiment of huscarl cavalry rode ahead of their floating transport, two thousand men in silver uniforms and purple-plumed helms. Each man carried a tall, glitter-tipped lance in one hand, with a fusil-carbine sheathed at their back. Another five regiments of masked infantry followed behind them, marching in perfect lockstep with glittering silver-steel banners overhead and freshly issued las-rifles carried upon every shoulder.

This was but a fraction of the armed forces commanded by House Devine.

Far below, in armoured stockades, hundreds of thousands of mechanised infantry, divisions of superheavy tanks, batteries of artillery and entire cohorts of battle robots stood ready to obey the commands of this world's Imperial Commander. That someone had seen fit to make Raeven's father that man was just another example of the absurdity inherent in every facet of this new Imperium.

Streamers and banners in black and gold, ivory and sea-green hung from every window, together with the entwined eagle-and-naga banner that had been the adopted heraldry of House Devine ever since the coming of the Emperor's Legions ninety-seven years ago. After a bloodless compliance – thanks in no small amount to the meticulous records kept by each Knightly House – the planet's existing calendars had been scrapped in favour of the new Imperial dating system.

By its reckoning, the current year was '966.M30', and the 'One hundred and Sixty-Eighth Year of the Emperor's Great Crusade'. It was a monstrously arrogant means of control, thought Raeven, but one which seemed to suit the emergent galactic empire perfectly.

Numerous heraldic devices proclaimed the presence of other noble Houses, most of which Raeven recognised thanks to years of enforced study as a child, but some he did not. Most likely quaintly provincial Houses barely worthy of the name, who could perhaps boast a single warrior of note.

Raeven sat back on the hard wooden seat of the carriage, basking in the adulation of the crowds. He knew most of it was for Albard, but didn't care. People liked their warrior kings to look like warriors, and his brother fitted that description better than he.

Yoked to the carriage and grunting with the effort of pulling it was a powerful creature with the wide, beast-of-burden shoulders of a grox and a long neck that reached at least four metres from its body. Atop that muscular neck was a ferocious, avian head with a razored beak and hostile eyes. The azhdarchid was

a flightless bird-creature that roamed the grassy plains in small family groupings; comical to look at, but a deadly predator capable of taking down even a well-armed hunter.

Cranial implants drilled into its skull rendered the beast subservient, though Raeven had often wondered what might happen were they to be removed. Could a tamed beast ever reclaim its bestial nature?

Nor was the azhdarchid the only beast to form part of their procession.

Following with lumbering, heavy footfalls was the simian bulk of a mallahgra, one of the few great beasts remaining beyond the high forested mountains of the Untar Mesas highlands. Standing nearly seven metres tall when fully upright, and covered in thick fur the colour of bleached granite, the mallahgra was an incredibly powerful animal. Its short hind legs and long, pile-driving upper limbs were corded with muscle and easily capable of tearing their way through the thickest armour. Its bullet-shaped head was a nightmarish blend of armoured beetle and fang-filled shark maw that could swallow a man whole with one bite. It had six eyes, one pair angled forward like a predator's, one either side of its skull like a prey animal, and another pair set in a ridged band of flesh at the base of its neck.

Raeven's brother knew from bitter experience that this curious evolutionary arrangement made them devils to hunt. Like the azhdarchid, the mallahgra's animal brain was pierced by implants to suppress its natural instincts, and it too had been tasked with a duty in this parade.

The mallahgra wore a tight-fitting set of stocks fashioned from brass and bone. Its clawed hands were locked within, and hung from the wide spar were half a dozen corpses that swayed with the rolling gait of the immense beast. The wind changed and the stench of dead flesh wafted over the carriage. Albard wrinkled his nose and shook his head.

'Throne, they stink,' he said.

Raeven twisted around to observe the corpses. All were naked, and wore boards nailed to their ribs that proclaimed their crime.

Only one transgression merited such punishment: heresy.

'A price to be paid, I fear,' he muttered.

Albard frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'The followers of the Serpent Gods are trotted out any time an act of ceremonial obeisance is to be undertaken,' said Raeven. 'After all, we must make a show of willingness to embrace the new order of the galaxy and demonstrate that we're doing our bit to purge the planet of the old ways. The Imperial Truth demands it.' He grinned. 'A century ago, it could have been you and I hanging from the mallahgra.'

'House Devine gave up belief in the Serpent Gods over a hundred years ago,' said Albard, as the huscarl cavalry began peeling off in predetermined patterns.

'Lucky for us, eh?' said Raeven. 'What was it mother said? Ah, yes – *treason is merely a matter of dates*.'

Albard's head snapped around at the mention of his stepmother, but Raeven ignored his brother's hostility.

The Citadel reared up before them, a solid mass of stone carved from the mountain by Mechanicum geo-formers. Raeven hadn't even been born then, but he'd seen the picts and read the accounts of its creation – garish hyperbole about continents cracking, worlds being reshaped by the will of the primarchs... *blah, blah, blah...*

As a piece of architecture it was certainly a striking edifice, a monument to the fortress-builder's art, where no expense had been spared and no opportunity to add yet another defensive bulwark had been missed. Thick walls of ochre stone, high towers, a singular portal of silvered adamantium and cunningly-wrought approaches ensured that only a madman would dare assault its walls.

Standing before the Argent Gate was Cyprian Devine, known as 'the Hellblade' to his enemies and as

Imperial Commander to his subjects.

Raeven knew him as father.

Lord Devine stood ten metres tall in his Knight Seneschal armour, a towering construction of technologies that predated the Imperium by thousands of years. Hunched over as though about to charge, their father's mount was all cruel curves and brutal lines. Its legs were piston-lined and looped with vapour-wreathed cabling, its black and green carapace segmented and overlapping like that of a giant swamp chelonian.

The entwined naga and eagle was represented on fluttering banners hung from the gimbal mount of their father's signature chainsabre and the twin barrels of his turbo lasers. As their carriage approached, the helmed head canopy split apart along a horizontal seam and lifted open, drizzling coolant fluid and vapour like gouts of hot machine-breath.

Strapped into the pilot's seat and hardwired into the mechanisms of his armour, the legendarily powerful figure of Cyprian Devine looked down on his sons as the cheering of the crowds rose to new heights, echoing down the valley sides like thunder. The two great beasts flinched at the noise, the mallahgra shaking the bodies hanging from its stocks and the azhdarchid letting loose an angry squawk. Gunfire salutes added to the cacophony and the music of a dozen colours bands swelled in anticipation as Albard and Raeven stepped down from the carriage.

Lord Devine's sons were to undergo the Ritual of Becoming, in order to take up their birthright as Knights of Molech.

Such a moment in history was worthy of celebration.

The corridors of the Sanctuary were polished steel, laid down over a thousand years ago by the first settlers to come to this world, so legend told. Lyx could well believe it. The deck plates, the iron-braced girders and hissing steam pipes that ran the length and breadth of the structure, were redolent with age. So distant was their construction that they didn't even have the appearance of having been built by human hand.

If she concentrated, she could feel the ever-present hum of the colossal generators buried in the rock of the mountain, the glacial heartbeats of the dormant engines in the vault below, and the distant burr of a million voices that echoed in every chamber when the nights grew long and the shadows crept from hiding. Lyx knew that she wasn't the only one to hear them, but she suspected that she was the only one who knew what they *really* were.

She passed a few servants, huscarls and men at arms, but none dared acknowledge her.

Lyx had a temper, they said. She was unpredictable, they said.

Volatile was another word they used.

Lyx didn't think she'd ever killed anyone, though she knew of at least one serving girl who would never walk again and another that she'd blinded with scalding tisane that hadn't been sweetened to her exacting specifications. One footman had lost his hands after he had brushed past her in the stables and allowed his fingers to touch the bare skin of her arm. Raeven had crippled him in a monstrously one-sided duel, taking his fingers one at a time as the boy pleaded for his life with his arms upraised in supplication.

The memory made Lyx smile, and she was beautiful again.

All trace of her late night assignation and hasty exit from Raeven's chambers had been thoroughly expunged by her handmaidens, who knew better than anyone how to conceal the evidence of her behaviour. Dressed in an appropriately archaic dress of copper panels, woven lacework and a plunging mallahgra-bone bodice, she swept through the darkened passageways like a ghost. She wore her hair in a glittering auburn cascade, threaded with silver wire and mother-of-pearl, carefully arranged to hide the

serpent tattoo behind her ear.

Lyx appeared every inch the Adoratrice consort she ached to be.

Not to the brutish Albard, but to Raeven.

The fates had chosen a different path for her: a repugnant, hateful path, but the voices still promised her that her fate could yet be changed. And if some societal norms and mores of convention had to be flouted in order to achieve that, then so much the better.

She climbed the last iron-grille stairs to the upper levels of the Sanctuary, knowing that Albard and Raeven would soon be making their way to the great citadel.

All the more reason to hurry.

At the top of the stairs, another metallic corridor curved around the circumference of the building, but it was to the first door that Lyx made her way. She knocked tentatively and swept inside the moment it was opened.

The room belied the Sanctuary's outward appearance of age, filled as it was with gleaming banks of complex machinery, groaning pipework, crackling glass orbs and throbbing generators. The man she had come to see closed the door, turning his fretful gaze upon her with longing and zealous heat.

'Were you followed?' he asked, breathless with anticipation.

'Of course not,' she snapped. 'No one but you would willingly follow me.'

The man's mouth opened and closed like that of a landed fish, and it repulsed her that she had given him leave to touch her. Sacristan Nadezhda was a slender man of middling years, whose face was half human, half machine – one of the artificer class who maintained the towering Knights at the heart of the Sanctuary. The human part was partially obscured by the tattoo of a serpentine naga that coiled around his eye socket.

Not quite Mechanicum, but not wholly human either.

But just human enough.

'No, I suppose not,' he said, his relief evident in the relaxing of his permanent frown. 'But they don't know you like I know you. They don't see the softness you try so hard to hide behind that patrician demeanour.'

She wanted to laugh, but matters were afoot that kept a rein on her desire to mock him.

'No one else gets to see it,' she said, running a teasing finger over the swell of her plunging neckline. 'Just you.'

Nadezhda ran his paper-dry tongue over his lips, staring with undisguised hunger at her décolletage. 'Do we have time for one last... you know, before Lord Devine's sons arrive?'

Lyx felt a pressure build behind her eyes that made her want to pluck the concealed bone-blade from her bodice and plunge it into Nadezhda's throat, over and over again. She quelled it and let out a soft sigh. Nadezhda took that as affirmation and fumbled with the belt of his crimson robes.

'Yes, my love,' said Lyx, biting her bottom lip to keep the revulsion from showing. 'But then I need you to do something for me. Something to prove just how much you love me.'

'Anything,' said Nadezhda.

'I'm so glad you said that,' she purred.

Albard and Raeven marched side by side towards their father and, despite himself, Raeven had to admit that he felt somewhat underdressed. He hadn't been about to wear the old suit of fusion armour set aside for him since his tenth year, but he wished he'd at least strapped on a sword belt or a holster. Even from here, he could see his father's anger at his rich clothing.

Assuming he survived the Ritual of Becoming, he would be made to answer for his attire.

From a distance, Knight armour was impressive. Up close, it was downright terrifying.

Raeven had never seen the god-engines of the Mechanicum, but couldn't imagine that they would be any more fearsome than this. He knew that they were bigger, of course, but in the vid-captures he'd watched, they were giant, lumbering things; mountains in motion that won battles through sheer scale of firepower rather than any tactical finesse.

A Titan was a war machine, a Knight was a warrior.

Raeven's teeth itched at the presence of the Knight's ion shields and, even from below, he felt the heat of his father's displeasure.

Though he projected an insouciant air of disinterest, Raeven had studied the elaborate protocols and observances of the Ritual of Becoming closely. He knew there would be lengthy catechisms about duty, honour and fealty to be recited, and mnemonics to aid in the bonding process and ensure a perfect conjoining with the suit of armour he would pilot after a successful imprinting.

Only now did it dawn upon Raeven that, after tonight, he would no longer be the same man. Bonding with his armour would change him forever, and a sliver of doubt oozed into his skull, like a worm through a rotten apple.

Albard dropped to one knee before Lord Devine, his fusion armour's servos whining with the movement.

Raeven hesitated, but before he could mirror his brother's movement, he heard screams behind him. Shots were fired, followed by what sounded like the detonation of a grenade. He spun around in time to see a man sprinting from the crowds, his long robes billowing behind him like a cape. His face was partially augmented, a coiled tattoo inked around the skin of his left eye. Men and women lay dying behind him, scattered by an explosion that had blown a hole in the barrier separating the crowds from the Via Argentum.

The man ran towards Cyprian Devine's mount, and Raeven saw something strapped to his chest like cross-wise bandoliers – a series of wired black boxes and rows of what looked like miniature generators. Shots from the House guard streaked the air, bright las-bolts and solid slugs, but the man led a charmed life as every shot sliced past him without effect. Raeven ducked behind the still kneeling Albard as a bullet whined past his ear and another tore up a chunk of the roadway at his feet.

'The Serpent Gods live!' screamed the man as he reached the carriage, depressing a home-made trigger. Raeven felt a moment's disbelief as he saw something familiar in his appearance, but before he could register what it was, a huscarl's bullet finally took the man's head off just as the device upon his chest detonated.

The blast lifted Raeven from his feet, but the man hadn't been wearing a bomb in the conventional sense – the chemical sniffers would have detected that long before he'd gotten this far. It was something far more dangerous: a powerful electromagnetic pulse expanded in a dome of deadening force, shorting out every device within a hundred metres.

The skimmer carriage slammed down onto the road, lasrifles flatlined and energy cells were discharged in an instant.

And the cranial implants of the mallahgra and azhdarchid blew out in twin showers of sparks.

'No...' Raeven murmured.

The mallahgra loosed a wet bellow and tore the stocks from its neck with the ease of a man removing a loose necktie. It hurled the brass and bone contraption into the crowd, the corpses flying off with the force of the throw. Nictitating membranes on its multiple eyes flickered, as if the beast had only just awoken from a long hibernation to find a rival in its feeding grounds. The azhdarchid reared up, clawing the air with its poleaxing wings and screeching in anger to find itself yoked to a lump of dead metal.

'Get me up!' grunted Albard, straining under the weight of his armour.

Raeven stared stupidly at his brother. ‘What are you talking about? Get up yourself. You’re the one in armour.’

‘Fusion armour,’ pointed out Albard, and Raeven suddenly understood.

‘You can’t move,’ said Raeven. ‘The systems are fried.’

‘I know, damn you,’ hissed Albard. ‘Now help me.’

Raeven looked up, and the mallahgra roared as it saw an object against which it could direct its anger. Mounted huscarls charged the beast, las-lances dipped and crackling energy arcs dancing over their conductive tips, but the beast smashed them aside as it charged with a knuckle-bounding lope. Men and horses flew through the air, broken in half and turning end over end.

Gunfire stitched across the mallahgra’s hide, setting light to its fur but unable to penetrate its rugose skin and the ultra-dense layers of muscle tissue beneath. Raeven turned to see what in the name of all things wondrous was keeping his father from the fight – of all the weapons here at this moment, a Knight was the one thing that could conceivably kill an angry mallahgra.

Cyprian Devine’s Knight armour fizzed and crackled with arcing traceries of angry lightning, its onboard systems fighting to keep themselves alight. The Knight had been at the very edge of the blast, spared the full force of the electromagnetic pulse.

But it hadn’t escaped completely, and its systems were struggling to reset.

‘Typical,’ said Raeven. ‘Just when I need you most...’

He dragged Albard’s sword from its heavy scabbard, but cursed when he realised it was an energy sabre, and therefore now useless. The blade didn’t even have an edge, relying upon disruptive energies to cut through an opponent’s armour.

With a crash of splintering timber, the azhdarchid finally tore itself free of the yoke securing it to the skimmer carriage.

‘Hurry, Raeven!’ pleaded Albard. ‘Help me!’

His brother’s eyes were filled with fear. Albard could hear the mallahgra – its bloodcurdling roar and the thump of its clawed hands powering it forward – but he couldn’t see it, and that fear of the unknown had unmanned him. He’d already lost an eye to a beast like this and was in no hurry to be standing in the way of this one.

‘Sorry, brother,’ said Raeven, still clutching the impotent sword.

He stood, but before he could turn and run, the mallahgra was upon him.

Its multiple eyes were bloodshot and confused, which was no surprise, but it knew fresh meat when it saw it. A three-clawed hand swiped for him, but Raeven’s honed reflexes carried him out of the way. He dived and swung the sword, the blade bouncing from the monster’s thick hide without effect. It roared and snapped its segmented, shark-like head toward him. Serrated teeth sliced through his thin clothing and tore a deep furrow across his chest and shoulder. He cried out in pain, rolling beneath its slashing paws.

More soldiers were coming forward, shooting from the hip at both beasts. The azhdarchid met their charge, its heavy wings slashing out like bludgeoning clubs and dewclaws tearing through half a dozen men with every arcing sweep. Its razored beak bit armoured warriors and their mounts in two with each bite.

Raeven scrambled to his feet, running towards the Citadel and hoping that someone inside would have the presence of mind to open the damned gates. He pulled up short as a whining, screeching steel leg stomped past, almost slamming into him as it went. The wake of the Knight’s passage spun Raeven around, and he fell as the energised force of the ion shield pushed him down. Sparks and breached fuel lines drooled in the wake of the Knight’s steps.

The mallahgra launched itself at Cyprian, throwing both its arms around his mount, but Raeven’s father

was in no mood for a close-quarters brawl.

Turbo lasers blitzed with killing fire, punching bloody craters deep into the beast's chest and ripping scorched chunks from its back. It bellowed in anger and pain, but its stunted nervous system would take more punishment before it would drop. A thundering blow slammed into the Knight's canopy – which Raeven saw had remained stubbornly open – sending blades of broken steel stabbing inside.

Its jaw closed on the Knight's head with a throaty bellow, but the teeth slid clear, chewing silver gouges in its armoured carapace. Scads of torn armour plating fell around Raeven, and he jumped aside as heavy lumps of chewed metal slammed down. The turbo lasers blazed again, and this time the mallahgra knew that it had been hurt.

Sticky blood rained down as Lord Devine freed his chainsabre arm and its internal generator finally overcame the effects of the electromagnetic pulse. The enormous chainsabre roared to life and the spinning teeth, each larger than a man's forearm, revved up with eye-blurring speed.

The screaming blade plunged into the mallahgra's gut, tearing up into its heart and lungs and exploding from its shoulder in a welter of shredded bone and meat. The beast howled as Cyprian wrenched the madly revving sabre from its body, and its arm and most of its right side peeled away from its spine.

Rightly was Cyprian Devine known as the Hellblade.

Finally accepting that it was dead, the mallahgra slumped to its knees, its remaining arm falling limply to its side as it slid down the front of the blood-spattered Knight. The carcass fell onto its side and the noxious stink of it mingled with the burnt electrical smell of the wounded machine.

Cyprian rotated the body of the Knight to look down at Raeven. Blood covered his father's features, and Raeven saw two spars of steel impaling his body – one through the stomach, the other through a shoulder. The Knight's armoured frame sagged in sympathetic pain, but Cyprian Devine wasn't about to let potentially mortal wounds slow him down.

'Get your brother into the Sanctuary,' he ordered through gritted teeth.

With the immediate danger over, Raeven stood and wiped a hand across his face.

'You can't mean to go through with the Becoming?' he said. 'Not after all this?'

'Now more than ever,' snapped Cyprian. 'Do as I say, boy. Both of you *must* imprint with your armour tonight. The suits have been consecrated and prepared, they are awaiting you in the Vault Transcendent. If you do not bond with them now, they will never accept you.'

Raeven nodded as his father turned the Knight and set off with a lopsided stride after the rampaging azhdarchid. Its screeching, hooting cries came from farther down the valley, where Devine soldiers were still trying to bring it down.

A slow smile spread across Raeven's face as he realised the people around him were cheering his name, but it took him a moment to understand why.

He stood beside the corpse of a gutted mallahgra with a blade in his hand, a blade that now began to spark into life and blaze with violet energy. It didn't matter that he hadn't killed this beast, only that he'd stood against it.

He raised the borrowed sword and yelled, '*Devine!*'

Two regiments of Dawn Guard awaited them within the citadel, but whatever ceremonial splendour had once been imposed on their ranks had been shed the moment word came through about the assassination attempt. Officers and soldiers discarded high-fluted helms, fluttering pennants and gilded breastplates of ornamented gold and silver. They wanted to march out to fight alongside their lord and master, but their duty to Lord Devine's sons kept them within the citadel.

Raeven felt a twinge of regret that the mallahgra's attack had robbed him of this chance to parade in front

of these men on his way to the Sanctuary, but contented himself with the crowds cheering his name from beyond the walls.

'If I was a superstitious man, I'd be inclined to think that this attack was a bad omen,' he said.

'If I believed in omens, I might agree with you,' said Albard, wheezing and breathless with the effort of walking in bulky fusion armour with a fried generator and no motive power.

'Did you see the size of that mallahgra?' said Raeven, letting out a pent-up breath as the sliced meat of his arm throbbed painfully. 'Throne, I thought that brute had me.'

'We almost died out there,' Albard gasped, his scarred features ashen and his eyes wide.

'*I* nearly died,' corrected Raeven, holding out his bloodied arm and doing his best to hide just how much it really hurt. 'That beast wasn't looking at you like you were its next meal.'

'You're lucky to be alive,' said Albard.

Raeven dropped into a fencing stance and held out Albard's sword. 'Me?' he said with a wide grin. 'It's the mallahgra that's the lucky one. If your sword hadn't shorted out, I'd have taken its whole arm off.'

'Lucky for it then.'

'If father hadn't intervened, I swear I'd have cut it apart, piece by piece.'

The twin-drum fusion generator on Albard's armour sparked with alarming bangs of overloaded control mechanisms and hissed with venting gasses. Irreparably damaged electrical systems leaked blue-tinged smoke.

'Help me get this damn suit off,' snapped Albard, and the fleeting moment of fraternal bonhomie was snuffed out in a heartbeat.

Raeven backed away from his brother as a piercing whine built from the generator. He knew from long years of training in a similar suit that the archaic systems of fusion armour were dangerously temperamental. Only the Mechanicum priests had the knowledge required to maintain such outdated technology, but they had little interest in servicing family heirlooms.

'I'm not your damn squire,' said Raeven. 'Do it yourself.'

'Hurry, before the fusion reactor burns through the plates.'

Raeven shook his head and waved forward a trio of Sacristans who awaited his leave to approach. 'You three, get him out of his armour. Quickly! Before the fusion reactor burns through the plates.'

The red-robed men ran to help Lord Devine's eldest son. A Sacristan with a bulky, hazard-striped cylinder strapped to his back attached cables to inload deactivation codes to the reactor core and frost-limned pipes to inject coolant fluids. The remaining two deployed power tools to undo bolts, remove locking clasps and peel rapidly-heating plates from Albard's body in smoking lumps of silvered metal.

As Raeven watched them work, he had a sudden flash of memory, recalling the man who had detonated the electromagnetic pulse on the Via Argentum.

'He was a Sacristan,' he said.

'Who was?' said Albard.

'The bomber. He was wearing a Sacristan's robes.'

'Don't be absurd,' said Albard, glancing down at the men working to remove his useless armour. 'What possible reason could a Sacristan have for assassinating father?'

'Trust me, he's an easy man to dislike.'

Another memory came to him – the bomber was a Sacristan, and he was a Sacristan that Raeven had seen before. En route to a clandestine rendezvous in Lyx's bedchamber some months ago, he'd seen the man loitering in the upper chambers of Albard's tower. Wanting the Sacristan gone, he'd chastened him for his tattoo's resemblance to a Serpent cult icon. Bowing and scraping, the man had promised to have it removed, and Raeven had put the matter from his mind.

He'd put the Sacristan's presence down to Knightly business, but that seemed an unlikely explanation now.

Albard shrugged off the last of his armour and stepped away from its smoking remains as though it were a pile of xenosmilus dung, or a petitioning freeman.

'Thanks for nothing, Raeven,' said Albard, staring at the ruined plates.

'I told you it was stupid to wear–'

'What did you just call me?' said Albard, leaning in close with a threatening scowl.

If Raeven's brother thought to intimidate him with scholam-yard theatrics, he was even more foolish than he'd taken him for.

'You were going to have to take it off at the Sanctuary,' said Raeven. 'After tonight, you'll never wear it again anyway, so why do you care?'

'It is a priceless relic of our family's legacy,' said Albard. 'And it's ruined. I was to pass it to my firstborn upon his coming of age, and he to his.'

The inevitable escalation of their squabbling was averted by the arrival of an officer of the Dawn Guard and a mismatched squad of troopers. Some still wore portions of their ceremonial armour, and they looked like a troupe of comic actors playing soldiers.

'My lords,' said the officer. 'We need to get you out of here right now.'

'What for?' said Raeven. 'The mallahgra's dead, and if the azhdarchid's hasn't been killed by now I'll be very surprised.'

'True, my lord,' answered the officer, 'but from what I understand, a Serpent cultist detonated an electromagnetic bomb on the Via Argentum.'

'And he had his head blown off,' pointed out Raeven. 'So he's probably not too much of threat now.'

'It's unlikely he was working alone,' replied the officer. 'He will have accomplices.'

'How can you know that?' demanded Albard.

'It's what I would do if I was planning to assassinate Lord Devine.'

Raeven slapped a hand on the officer's shoulder and grinned at his brother. 'Good to know we're being protected by men who're thinking of ways they might kill us, eh?'

The officer blanched, and Raeven laughed.

'Lead on, my good man,' he said. 'Before the Serpent cult sees us all dead.'

Escorted by three hundred heavily-armed soldiers, Albard and Raeven made their way through the fortified precincts of the Dawn Citadel. What should have been a measured, triumphal approach to the Sanctuary was instead made in haste, with every man alert for the possibility of another treacherous attack. They traversed three more gates, each opened just wide enough to permit them passage before being slammed shut.

At the heart of the citadel was the Sanctuary.

Where the rest of the Dawn Citadel was built from the same ochre stone of the mountains, the Sanctuary had been constructed by Molech's first settlers, and its structure bore little resemblance to the fortress raised around it.

That it was ancient beyond imagining was clear, its circular plan evident in the geodesic dome that had clearly once graced the hull of a starship. Almost the entirety of the Sanctuary's structure had once been part of an interstellar vessel – its structural pylons scavenged from the ship's superstructure, its walls from exterior hull plating and its towering black and silver gates from some vast internal chamber.

This was the gateway to the Vault Transcendent. When the Knights of Molech rode to battle, they sallied forth from this portal.

The Sanctuary had been added to and embellished over the millennia since its construction, and what might once have been functional and drab was now garlanded with colourful banners, steel-formed gargoyles and bladed finials. An Imperial eagle banner streamed from a spired cupola at the dome's centre, with flags bearing the heraldry of the various Knightly Houses arranged around it on a lower level. The symbolism of the banners' arrangement was obvious, and Raeven marvelled at its lack of subtlety.

When the Emperor snapped his fingers and called the people of Molech to war, they had no choice but to answer.

Was it just him who was angered at the dominance evident in the way every element of Imperial iconography was elevated beyond that of Molech? Surely he couldn't be the only one to see it, but it appeared he was the only one who cared.

Grand processional stairs of black iron began at either side of the main gateway, circling around the building before meeting above it at a smaller circular entrance – one more suited to the scale of mortals. This upper entrance irised open and twin columns of red-robed Sacristans emerged, descending the stairs to bring the sons of Lord Devine to their Ritual of Becoming. Raeven put aside his resentment towards the Imperium as he imagined riding through the Transcendent Gate, hardwired into his own suit of Knight armour.

He glanced over at Albard, expecting to see the same flush of excitement in his scarred features as he knew must be evident on his own.

But his brother's face was deathly pale and a sheen of sweat coated his skin.

The Chamber of Echoes was not named for its acoustic properties, though they were impressive enough. Raeven's booted footfalls rang from the distant ceiling, a suspended canopy of thick cables and hissing pipework like jungle creepers or an impossibly vast nest of snakes. The floor was a patchwork of steel grilles, deck plates from the forgotten starship that had been cannibalised to create the structure of the Sanctuary.

A dim ultraviolet light shone through the pipes above, and flickering electro-flambeaux burned in iron sconces that had once been the piston covers of an engine housing. Two enormous mechanised thrones stood upon an elevated rostrum at the heart of the chamber, arranged so that those who sat upon them would be facing each other.

'The Throne Mechanicum,' said the acolyte who had led them within, 'through which you will each bond with your armour.'

They made several circuits of the internal structure of the Sanctuary, shedding their accompanying Sacristans as the robed acolytes of the Mechanicum took up positions throughout the building in preparation for the ritual. Eventually, only one was left, a shaven-headed drone who normally attended their father.

Without needing to be told, Raeven knew which of the Thrones was his, and he climbed the iron steps of its heavy, drably functional machinery to sit down. No sooner had he done so than heavy steel bands snapped into place at his ankles and wrists. A silver cowl rose from the rear portion of the throne and slipped smoothly over his head. Raeven felt the heat of electrical contact as whirring cable plugs slotted home in the input sockets bored into the back of his neck and spine.

The sense of invasive penetration was sharp and cold, but not unpleasant.

With connection established, Raeven blinked as he heard a susurration of half-heard voices around him, as though an invisible host of distant observers had silently entered the chamber to witness his Becoming.

'My lord,' said the Sacristan, gesturing to the throne opposite Raeven's.

Albard nodded, but made no move to climb the steps to his throne.

‘What’s the matter, brother?’ said Raeven. ‘Nervous?’

Albard shot him an angry look. ‘This isn’t how it’s supposed to work,’ he said. ‘The catechisms, the words we are to speak. This isn’t what I expected.’

The Sacristan nodded. ‘Given the unfortunate incident before the Argent Gate, Lord Devine has instructed us to dispense with much of the formal ritual associated with the Becoming.’

The Sacristan’s tone left no room for doubt as to what he thought of *that* particular instruction. Like their Mechanicum overseers, the Sacristans were great respecters of tradition, ritual and dogma.

‘But that’s to help us bond with the Knight armour,’ protested Albard.

‘Lord Devine felt you would be more than capable of establishing a connection without it,’ said the Sacristan. ‘He was *most* insistent.’

Albard swallowed hard, and Raeven savoured his brother’s discomfort. Normally as brusque and arrogant as their father, to see him so obviously frightened was a rare treat.

‘My lord, if you please,’ said the Sacristan.

‘Alright, damn you,’ snapped Albard, finally climbing the steps and sitting upon his throne.

The restraint mechanisms fastened around his brother’s limbs and the silver cowl rose to envelop the upper portion of his skull. Albard jerked as the communion umbilicals slotted into his body, grimacing as their whirring mechanism scraped the infected skin around his input sockets.

Raeven’s eyes met Albard’s, and he allowed himself a moment’s satisfaction as he saw the weakness deep within his brother – buried, and all but invisible to most people who knew him. But it was there now, horribly exposed and glaringly obvious.

‘Ready, brother?’ said Raeven.

Albard said nothing, his jaw clenching and unclenching in fear.

Satisfied that both men were secured within their thrones, the Sacristan leaned down and whispered into Albard’s ear. Such were the perfect acoustics of the chamber that Raeven heard every word, and his eyes widened at the look of horror on his brother’s face.

‘The Serpent Gods live,’ said the Sacristan.

Dawn was making its way up the valley as Cebella Devine watched Lyx climb the steps to the high walls overlooking the scene of the previous day’s carnage. Cebella’s huscarl bodyguards were keeping a respectful distance, and she felt her heart race as Lyx approached.

‘Is it done?’ asked Cebella, without turning to face the girl.

‘It is,’ confirmed Lyx.

‘And?’

‘There were... complications,’ said Lyx, clearly relishing the look of irritation that flitted across Cebella’s face.

‘Don’t draw this out, Lyx. Tell me.’

‘Raeven imprinted successfully. His Knight is a colt in the stable, wild and strong.’

‘And Albard?’

Lyx paused, her face a mockery of loss. ‘It grieves me to say that after the incident on the Via Argentum, Albard’s mind was unprepared to endure a night in the Chamber of Echoes.’

‘Does he live?’ asked Cebella.

Lyx nodded. ‘He does, but his Knight refused to bond with him and the bio-neural feedback from that rejection has irreparably damaged his mind. I fear he is lost to us.’

Cebella finally deigned to face Lyx and the two women shared a look that an outsider might have mistaken for shared grief, but which was in fact shared complicity.

‘Your pet Sacristan made quite a spectacle of himself,’ said Cebella at last.

‘A man will do foolish things for the sake of lust,’ agreed Lyx.

‘But he failed to kill Cyprian,’ said Cebella. ‘Impaled twice and the cantankerous old bastard still breathes. I almost admire him for that. Almost.’

‘Yes, Cyprian still lives, but look at what Raeven achieved,’ pointed out Lyx. ‘The people saw him stand and fight a mallahgra with only a powerless sword. From such tales are legends born.’

‘Do we have need of legends?’

‘We will,’ said Lyx, as a momentary dizziness swept through her and she blinked away the image of a fiery amber eye and a sweeping storm that stretched from horizon to horizon.

‘Another vision?’ asked Cebella, extending a hand to steady her.

‘Perhaps,’ nodded Lyx.

‘What do you see?’ demanded Cebella, keeping her voice low.

‘A time of great change is coming to Molech,’ said Lyx. ‘It will be many years from now, but when it comes, a terrible war will be fought. House Devine will play a pivotal role in it.’

‘Raeven?’

‘He will be a great warrior, and his actions will turn the tide of the war.’

Cebella smiled and released Lyx’s arm. She looked up into the lightening sky and pictured the worlds over which her son would claim dominion. Lyx was not the only Adoratrice to have the sight, but her secret powers waxed stronger than any that Cebella had known before.

‘You have grand ambitions for your twin brother,’ said Cebella.

‘No more than you, mother,’ said Lyx. ‘No more than you.’

HOWL OF THE HEARTHWORLD

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

His name was Thirteen Stars Falling. He was the one to spit upon the ground before the Lord of Winter and War.

'There's your answer, Russ.'

The Lord of Winter and War was a king without a throne. When he gathered the *Einherjar* blood-sworn, he did so without ceremony, holding a warriors' court on the bare earth. Every soul stood equal to his kinsmen, and every warrior present knew that the day would end with the fall of an executioner's axe.

All eyes lay upon the six souls awaiting judgement beneath the weeping storm. They stood without any attempt at formation, though instinct had each of them standing with enough room to draw and swing a blade. Rain drenched the brothers as they stood before their master, soaking their wolf pelts and polishing their grey ceramite to a greasy sheen.

The wind still carried the chemical reek of burned fuel, a legacy of the Legion's recent planetfall. No warriors' court would ever convene in the void; tradition was tradition, and not even the Lord of Winter and War could decree otherwise. Fenrisians and Terrans alike had a right to die with their boots upon honest earth.

Jarls and thegns from other companies formed a ring around the accused. Armed and armoured for battle, these chieftains murmured amongst themselves, their voices as deep and low as rousing bears. Talismans and charms were exchanged in place of meaningless coins as they gambled without shame on the lives of their kinsmen.

At last, Russ spoke. Outsiders often likened his voice to a canine's snarl, yet here amongst his sons he was but one of many with a feral edge to his words.

'That's the last refusal I will hear from Howl of the Hearthworld.'

Thirteen Stars Falling nodded. 'Then don't ask us again.'

The high king smiled, a thing of bared teeth and flashing eyes. He was ageless in the way that only godlings are ageless, and scarred in ways that a coward would never be scarred. Two wolves prowled by his side, loyal and hunter-keen. The Lord of Winter and War idly ran gloved fingers through the nearest beast's fur.

'I offer you honour,' he said, 'and you return it with defiance.'

'You have offered us banishment, my king. We refuse it. We will stay and hunt. We will fight with the Legion, as we were born to do.'

'I see.' The Imperium might know the primarch by a wealth of names and titles, but to his warriors he was the Lord of Winter and War, or more recently "the Russ" – first and most noble son of the old Russ Tribe.

And in the face of his son's defiance, Leman of the Russ was still smiling. Morbid merriment twisted the scars on his weathered features. Privately he wondered, as he often did in these moments, if the weeping sky was an omen. If so, it seemed an unsubtle one.

‘You know I’m within the rights of the blood-sworn to take your skulls for this. Is Howl of the Hearthworld so keen to surrender its heads to my sword’s edge?’

Thirteen Stars Falling stepped forward, proud in his war-mauled Crusade plate, prouder still of the brown fur cloak now turned sodden-black by the rising storm. By the reckoning of his people, Thirteen Stars Falling was an old man: one of the very first Wolves to sail from Fenris at his primarch’s side, scarred but still breathing despite all that the galaxy had thrown at him. Many of the first Fenrisian generation were gone into ash and memory, fallen amongst the thousands of battles fought by the Vlka Fenryka across the emergent Imperium. Most of the survivors were long since promoted out of the first packs, assigned with all honour to roles within the life-sworn Wolf Guard, or given the right to lead whole companies.

Thirteen Stars Falling had fought hard, not in order to rise but in order to remain where he was. He was a hunter, a stalker, a tracker, a killer – let the logistics of marching armies and sailing fleets fall to other men. His place was with his pack, leading Howl of the Hearthworld through the blood and smoke, an axe in his hand and a roar in his throat.

He scratched his chin through his braided beard, his fingers meeting the ivory rings fastened there. To him, it might seem only yesterday that his beard had been black with flecks of white; now it was white with streaks of grey. A warrior could fight everything but time and fate.

Before he spoke, Thirteen Stars Falling curled his lip to show his long fangs: the gesture of an elder sharing wisdom with a whelp.

‘It is not honour, my king. It is banishment. No matter how much you swear this is a hero’s duty, exile is still exile.’

The Russ turned a toothy smile upon the other warchiefs. ‘The Sigillite asked this of us, kinsmen. Answer me in truth, here in the warriors’ court – do you see no honour in this? The Regent of Terra himself beseeches us to watch the Lords of the Legions.’

A few of the thegns banged fists to breastplates, while others gave a low cheer not far from a murmur. The Russ laughed at their lukewarm display. He was well aware that this was a duty desired by none of them, and loved his sons for their honesty in saying so. But duty was duty.

Thirteen Stars Falling was unmoved. His cragged features, weathered and darkened by countless wars beneath countless suns, stared flatly towards his king.

‘If Malcador asks for watchers, then send watchers. We are warriors, Russ.’

‘And yet every other pack has agreed without this stench of rebellion.’

‘It is not our place!’ Thirteen Stars Falling bared his teeth in a snarl, saliva spraying from his clenched jaws. ‘We have spoken with Shadow of the Low Moon, as well as Night’s Voice. You send them towards battle, even if it means serving with the other Legions. Yet you send us away from all hope of war. The other packs offered no defiance because they aren’t being chained up in a cargo hold and shipped to Terra. You offer them new battlefields. You offer us only exile.’

Russ was no longer smiling. Proud he might be, but patient he was not.

‘The time for spit and spite is past, and the time for responsibility is upon us. Malcador asked this of me, and I will provide him what he requires.’

Thirteen Stars Falling shook his head, defeat creeping up his spine. There was no hiding the rage in his eyes, but it was the rage of a beaten beast.

‘We are not his thralls to order here and there at a whim. Rogal Dorn needs no watch-pack trailing at his heels – and if he does, then the Imperium is already lost. There’s no honour in this exile to Terra, Russ. How are we to take pride in the bloodless, warless fate of peasants and traders and farmers?’ He said the last word as a foul-tasting curse.

‘I care little for what pride you take in this purpose, kinsmen. I’ve enjoyed your defiance and I commend you for the fire in your hearts. But press on with it, and Sixth Legion archives will forever record you as the first and only pack to refuse the orders of its primarch. Is that the legacy you wish for Howl of the Hearthworld?’

Silence reigned, sudden and sharp. No one was willing to speak, not even Thirteen Stars Falling.

‘I thought as much,’ Russ said at last. ‘I will grant you the *Damarchus* for your journey to Terra. Be ready to leave within twelve hours.’

Howl of the Hearthworld stood motionless, going nowhere, saying nothing.

Instead it was Laughing Jaurmag who stepped forward, taking the place of Thirteen Stars Falling. As warchief of Cry of the Grieving Dragon, jarl of Tolv and master of many packs, he had the right to speak for any of them at a warriors’ court.

And speak he would.

‘My king,’ he said, looking up at Russ with eyes the same grey as the storm above.

‘Your king listens, Laughing Jaurmag.’

‘Russ,’ the chief said in his stern and unsmiling manner, ‘it cannot be this way. I cannot send warriors of my company to do a task that I would refuse myself. If you send Howl of the Hearthworld to Terra against their will, I will journey with them.’

He gripped the bronze torc around his throat, one armoured hand holding tight to the thick, tarnished metal ring. Leman of the Russ had bent that torc around Laughing Jaurmag’s neck himself, when the warrior first ascended to command.

For the first time since the court was convened, the primarch hesitated.

Rare were the nights when his sons could surprise him, and yet here was one of the Legion’s great warlords ready to tear the torc of rank from his neck, abandoning his forces to serve with a single wayward pack. The air felt colder, and not from the wind’s chill. Cry of the Grieving Dragon was a significant force within Tolv Company. Losing one of their packs was nearly meaningless, but losing their leader would be a different tale.

‘A noble sentiment. Yet who would lead the Cry of the Grieving Dragon in your absence?’

‘I care not. My successors will fight for the torc.’

Russ let the possibilities play out behind his eyes, liking none of them. But the warriors’ court had passed the point where it might end well. He went with his instinct, as he did in all things. Intuition always served him well.

‘Be it so. You will go with Howl of the Hearthworld.’

Laughing Jaurmag pulled the torc open with a quiet whine of straining metal, and cast the ring to the ground before his primarch’s boots. Silence reigned for another few heartbeats.

‘This isn’t exile,’ Russ said once more. ‘You say this is no honour, and here at this warriors’ council we will speak the truth. You are right, kinsmen – it’s no honour at all. It’s nothing more than a gesture of the Sigillite’s diplomacy. He cannot have watch-packs following only some of the primarchs. It must be all, or none.’

‘Then it should be none,’ Laughing Jaurmag dared to say. Many of the gathered jarls nodded at his words. ‘The Allfather would not wish for us to do this. It is not our–’

‘The Allfather toils in the Terran catacombs.’ Russ’s voice became a grindstone growl. ‘The Regent governs in my father’s absence. Let that be the end of your refusals.’

He softened his tone, fighting back the first touch of true anger. ‘The Sigillite’s wariness will pass in time. A handful of years on Terra, standing at my brother Dorn’s side. That is all I ask of you.’

‘Good, sire, because that’s all we’re giving you.’ Thirteen Stars Falling tilted his head back for a

moment, baring his throat in subtle submission. His pack-brothers did the same. None of them took any pleasure from the primarch's words, but as loyal sons they accepted them. 'Call us back to war soon, my king. Don't let us die peaceful deaths on Terra.'

One of the Regent's emissaries awaited them aboard the warship *Damarchus*. Prelate Quilym Yei was a small and slight man, robed in black and marked out immediately by Malcador's stylised sigil worn as a gold amulet around his thin neck. His voice was toneless to the point of monotony, which amused and disgusted Howl of the Hearthworld in equal measure. He showed no fear of them, which would at least be understandable. Instead, he displayed little more than bland focus, considering it best not to antagonise the barbarians any more than necessary.

It was his duty, he informed the Wolves, to record the minutiae of their rolls of honour to date, for detailed entry into the Terran archives. The Throne received full accountings from every one of the Imperium's expeditionary fleets – including Legiones Astartes citations and casualty lists – but the flow of information was slow and unreliable at best, given the distances involved and the vast reams of data being transferred from one side of the galaxy to the other. For an actual return to the Solar System, with Legion warriors standing on precious Terran soil, a more immediate accounting was required.

This was how he greeted them in one of the ship's briefing chambers, shortly after they came aboard. In response, one of the pack spat onto the deck before him. Rather than feel any insult, Quilym was faintly charmed by the disrespectful gesture. He had studied the VI Legion and their primitive home world for many years, and knew many of the Fenrisian rituals and traditions carried through the Space Wolves' ranks. Spitting wasn't merely a dirty habit to them – to some tribes it was an old superstition to ward off ill-luck. To others, it was a way of showing displeasure, refusing to heed another's words. In this case, Quilym suspected it might be a little of both.

'How very hostile,' he noted with nothing less than perfect politeness. 'Am I to assume you would rather be sailing to Prospero with your Legion, than making this journey to Terra?'

The Wolf that had spat now shook his head. 'Already you show your ignorance, scribe. The Einherjar goes to hear the Warmaster first. Horus Lupercal wishes to speak with the Lord of Winter and War. Only then will the Rout sail onward to the court of the Crimson King.'

Interesting, thought the prelate. Malcador would find that very interesting indeed.

'Of course,' replied Quilym, still absolutely neutral. 'Forgive my dated information. Now, as to my duty, if you would list your names and ranks, we can get under way. I realise it seems a chore but the entirety of the Seventh Legion underwent the same rigorous–'

'Shut your mouth,' said one of the other Wolves, 'or I shall kill you.'

The prelate hesitated. The cybernetic stylus in place of his left index finger hovered above the scratched surface of his worn data-slate. He observed them, these towering, hulking, unwashed warriors with iron rings bound into their braided beards and their faces marked by jagged, runic tattoos. They stank of sweat, of weapon oils, of old furs left out in the rain.

He drew a breath to reply, then exhaled it softly as every pair of grey-blue eyes in the chamber stared into him with bladed intensity. Slowly, calmly, he put the data-slate down upon the central table. The Wolves ignored him at once, sharing bitter smiles and snarled words in their guttural fracas of a language.

Quilym endured the indignity of being ignored for several minutes. He cleared his throat during what he hoped was a lapse in their growled and toothy 'conversation'.

'You're still here,' said one of the Wolves. This one had an axe over his shoulder – a weapon as long as Quilym was tall. 'Why is that?'

But the prelate had not risen to his admittedly modest rank by being easily cowed. He admired order

above all, and his duty was to leave order in his wake, no matter where he went. He was, in his own way, just as responsible for bringing peace and stability to the galaxy as these ceramite-clad barbarians, and Malcador had not chosen him for this journey on a whim. The Sigillite trusted him, trusted his efficiency.

'I require the details of your rolls of honour,' he said, keeping his tone calm, the way one might speak softly to an untamed beast for fear of igniting its temper. 'If you want me gone from your presence then cooperate with me, and I will leave with significantly more haste. Let's begin with your names and ranks, if you please.'

The first to speak was Laughing Jaurmag. He was a scarred old greybeard, his armour encrusted with bronze runes in one of the several dozen regional tongues of his hearthworld Fenris.

He was warlord of Cry of the Grieving Dragon, respected jarl of Tolv, and once this foolish exile was a thing of the past he would fight for his place once again. He had been given his Fenrisian deed-name by smiling kinsmen who believed that his humour was as bleak and cold as the frost that clung to the Aett's battlements. Before this day, he led six hundred men to war beneath alien suns and alien moons, shedding oceans of foeblood for the Russ and the Allfather. Now he stood with Howl of the Hearthworld, oath-sworn to them during the banishment they now shared.

But he said none of this. These weren't things for outlanders to hear.

Instead, he gave a name and a rank that meant almost nothing to anyone within his Legion.

'My name is Jaurmag,' he said. 'Chapter Master of the Grieving Dragon and commander of the Twelfth Great Company.'

Prelate Quilym Yei licked his thin lips as he wrote the words down. He evidently missed the mocking smiles that the Wolves shared with one another.

The next to speak was a whitebeard, where Laughing Jaurmag was merely greying. His beard was braided all the way down his breastplate, and his face was the leathery tan of old hide.

He was Thirteen Stars Falling, thegn of Howl of the Hearthworld. He had been named for the night he first drew foeblood in his tenth winter, when the sky rained fire upon his tribe's lands. He had been a boy in the Russ Tribe when Leman rose to rule, and he sailed with the primarch into the stars when the Allfather beckoned them to conquer all of creation at his side.

But, like Laughing Jaurmag, he said none of this.

'I am Kargir,' he told the prelate. 'Sergeant of Nineteenth Squad.'

And on it went. One by one, Howl of the Hearthworld gave the names they had carried as children, keeping their true names away from the ears – and the quill – of this outsider.

The next to speak wore wolf pelts of dirty white, marked with filthy pinkish patches where blood had fallen, settled into the fur, and been scraped away far too late to ever look clean again.

He was Echo of Three Heroes, named by his grandmatron, the elder of the Vakreyr Tribe, to honour the ancestors he so resembled. He heard the ghost-whispers of his forefathers when foeblood hissed on the melting snow.

'I am Vaegr,' he said. 'I serve in the squad of Sergeant Kargir.'

'And you?' the prelate asked the next warrior in line.

This Wolf's hair was short, an unruly thatch of dull brown atop his head. His beard was cut short, but uneven, as though the warrior had done a barber's work alone with a knife and no mirror.

He was Kin to the Night, named for the blackness that sired him and the darkness that bore him. He hunted unseen. He killed unseen. He was the shadow that his brothers cast. He was the blade that guarded their backs. He was the knife beneath the shieldwall.

'Ordun,' he said. 'I serve in the squad of Sergeant Kargir.'

‘And you?’

The next Wolf bore more savage facial tattoos than the others. Runic lettering ran from the corners of his eyes like tears, telling a tale in a language too foreign for the prelate to read.

He was Storm’s Son, named for the tempest that raged above his tribe’s wooden ships on the night his mother pushed him from her womb. He gave his first cry to the thundering heavens as his mother used her own sword to cut the life-cord that bound the baby to her body. No darker omen existed than to come into the world upon a stormy sea, and yet he had prospered in battle and in life. The rune-tears that ran down his cheeks were shamanic blessings to ward off the ill-luck of his birth. They had never failed him.

‘Brandwyn,’ he said with a liar’s smile. ‘I serve in the squad of Sergeant Kargir.’

‘And you?’ Quilym asked the next – the one that had threatened to kill him. Practically cowled in thick pelts and festooned with grenade bandoliers, the warrior grinned with metal teeth set in an augmetic jaw.

He was Iron Song, named for his voice, so flawed in speech because of the injuries to his face, yet flawless in fireside songs and saga-tellings. His reconstructed jaw was a living lesson in taking care when headbutting a helmeted enemy.

‘Herek,’ he said. ‘I serve in the squad of Sergeant Kargir.’

‘And you?’

The Wolf was black-haired, his long mane dragged back from his face and bound into a hunter’s sweep. His eyes were an emotionless, soulless blue, as pale as a summer sky. He was using a whetstone to sharpen the teeth of a chainaxe that didn’t need sharpening, and spoke in a voice softer than any of his kinsmen.

‘I am No Foes Remain.’

The prelate looked up from his data-slate, his brow furrowing. ‘That isn’t a name.’

No Foes Remain didn’t blink as he stared back, neither angry nor calm, simply distant.

‘It is a name,’ he said. ‘It is my name.’

‘And how does one come by a name like... that?’

‘One fights,’ the warrior replied, ‘until no foes remain.’

Quilym licked his lips once more, unaware how openly he betrayed his irritated nerves with that particular tic.

‘Rykath,’ Thirteen Stars Falling interrupted. ‘His name is Rykath. He serves in my squad.’

No Foes Remain turned his dead eyes towards his pack leader but said nothing. The prelate recorded the information, such as it was.

‘And you?’ Quilym asked the last of them.

The warrior’s head was shaved but for twin long, thick braids by his temples, while the back of his head was enclosed in the cradling protection of an armoured, psychically sensitive hood. His wolf pelts were black – all others were grey, brown, or white.

He was Fights the Final Winter, spirit-speaker and war-priest of the Runes, the Wind, the Frost, and the Bones. He was named for his first vision quest, when he dream-saw the end of all things in a future age when the Allfather’s triumph had turned to ash. He would die before he allowed that fate to come to pass.

‘Naukrim,’ he said. ‘I am what you would call a Librarian.’ A sense of stillness took form in the chamber in the wake of those words. ‘I notice you don’t write those words down like the others, little man. Is there a problem?’

Quilym met the Wolf’s eyes, unflinching, unblinking. ‘The Edict of Nikea...’

‘Ah.’ Fights the Final Winter gave a slight bow, seemingly of respect. ‘Perhaps I should say I was a Librarian. Now I stand with my brothers, using nothing but bolter and blade. Is that answer more to your satisfaction?’

The prelate touched his stylus to the data-slate's surface, yet still made no mark. 'You wear the wargear of one who still uses his powers.'

'My shamans' crown?' Fights the Final Winter reached back to tap his armoured fingertips against the psychic hood. 'To remove it would disrespect the spirit of my armour. It serves no other purpose.'

Quilym swallowed and, with surprising dignity, he stood up straighter. 'I will not be lied to.'

The Wolves drew closer. Not in an armoured tide, not with weapons howling, but with the subtle leer of warriors who dearly wish to do what they do best. The servo-rich joints of their armour purred and snarled and growled.

Laughing Jaurmag was the one to speak. 'You've had all the truth we intend to give, scribe. Write it down and be gone from our sight.'

Quilym narrowed his eyes, and for a moment it seemed he might hesitate.

'Very well,' he said at last. 'I think that will do for now.'

Iron Song keyed in the code to lock the bulkhead once Malcador's preening little scribe was on the other side of it. He exhaled through his metal teeth, huffing a breath with canine irritation.

'Three months,' he said to his kinsmen. 'Three months to Terra, and that's only if the tides are fair. Three months of that entertaining little rodent.'

Thirteen Stars Falling watched the sealed door as if he could stare a hole right through the plasteel. His thoughts were of the prelate, and those thoughts were troubled and dark.

'He was lying to us even as we lied to him. He's no mere scribe. Our runt of a prelate has the stink of Malcador's inner circle about him. If he's not a bonded part of it, he still walks in the same chambers as those who are. Be cautious around him, all of you.'

Nods of assent answered his order.

'Three months,' Iron Song said again. 'Three months, while the Einherjar sail to arrest Magnus One-Eye without us. What a story that would make. What a tale... and I am to miss it, to be chained up and shipped off in this worthless waste of time. Please, let this all be nothing more than a bad jest.'

Kin to the Night was tossing a knife up and down, catching it perfectly at the end of each falling spin.

'And I fear a cold welcome awaits us yet on Terra, kinsmen. Lord Dorn of the noble Seventh is going to be about as pleased to see us as we are to see him.'

There seemed no immediate answer to that unwelcome truth. Storm's Son looked to the sealed door, then back to his kinsmen. A slow grin dawned through his beard.

'No Foes Remain,' he said, his rough and oaken voice lifting in a fair impression of the prelate's airy tones. 'That's not a name.'

The pack, joined by their warchief, shared their first laugh since the Lord of Winter and War had first told them that they were to be banished to Terra. Even Laughing Jaurmag smiled – though true to his name, it was but the briefest of things.

LORD OF THE RED SANDS

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

There is only one thing worth fighting for.

He knows this, while his father languishes in the ignorance of false righteousness; while his brothers play gods to a godless universe; while heartless weaklings claim to be his sons, walking the coward's path over the way of the warrior.

But he knows – even if no one else will listen or understand – that there is only one thing worth fighting for.

He crests the barricade, the axes howling in his hands. The dead city sends its finest against him time and again, and time and again the dead city's finest fall back in screaming, hewed chunks of flesh and ceramite. Some wear his brothers' colours – the royal purple of preening Fulgrim, or the drab, pale hues of cadaverous Mortarion. They charge, dreaming of glory, and they die knowing nothing but pain and shame.

Some of them wear the filthy white of his own sons. They die no differently from the others. They bleed the same blood, and cry the same oaths. They stink just the same when their bodies are ripped open, organs bared to the cold air.

Flashes of insight come to him in the storm of swords – a name etched upon white armour seems familiar for the span of a heartbeat, or the angle of an axe reminds him of another fight, back in the age of the burning sun beating down upon the red sand.

He kills every warrior that rises before him, and chases those wise enough to retreat. The former he breaks open with single blows from his straining axes. The latter he hunts in leaping pounces, the way arena beasts once hunted starved men and women.

Glory?

Glory is for those too weak to find inner strength, leaving them hollow parasites, feeding on the affection of even lesser men. Glory is for cowards, too afraid to let their names die.

He stands upon their bodies now, grinding bootprints into their breastplates as he adds to their number. A monument to futility rises at his feet: each death means that he has to climb higher to welcome fresh meat. The hammer-blows of gunfire keep on pounding into his back and shoulders with bestial kicks. An irritation, nothing more. Scarcely even a distraction. This battle was won the moment he set foot in the dead city.

He buries an axe in the chest of another son, but feels it slip from his blood-slick fingers as the warrior tumbles back. The binding chain at his wrist pulls taut, preventing the weapon's theft, but he sees what they are trying to do – three of his own sons shouting, scrabbling to cling to the axe they stole, even as the blade is buried in one of their bodies. A warrior's ultimate sacrifice, trading his life for the chance to disarm an enemy. Their united strength drags at his arm, turning his panting breath to a wet snarl.

He does not pull back and resist. He launches into them, shattering their armour with foot, with fist, with his dark metal teeth. Their cunning sacrifice avails them nothing but death by bludgeoning rather than the shrieking blade of a chainaxe.

Their bodies are added to the corpse monument. Every movement is pain, now. Each breath comes from ragged lungs, through bleeding lips.

There is still time, still time, still time. He can win this war without his brother's guns.

Conquest?

What tyrant first dreamed of conquest and clad violent oppression in terms of virtue? Why does the imposition of one will over another draw men like no other sin? For more than two hundred years, the Emperor has demanded that the galaxy align itself to his principles at the cost of ten thousand cultures that lived free and without the need for tyranny. Now Horus demands that the stellar nations of this broken empire dance to his tune instead. Billions die for conquest, to advance the pride of these two vain creatures cast in the shapes of men.

There is no virtue in fighting for conquest. Nothing is more worthless and hollow than obliterating freedom for the sake of more land, more coin, more voices singing your name in holy hymn.

Conquest is as meaningless as glory. Worse, it is evil in its selfishness. Both are triumphs only in a fool's crusade.

No. Not glory, not conquest.

He follows the blood to his prey. The warrior slouches on the ground, with his back to the wall, his armoured thighs decorated with a sloppy trail of innards. Blood marks his face. Blood marks everything on this world, but the centurion's face is a reflection of the battle itself. Half of his features no longer exist beyond bare, cracked bone – ripped away by the primarch's axe. The officer's remaining eye is narrowed by the preternatural focus necessary to remain alive, without screaming, when your intestines have been torn from your body.

He should not be alive, and yet here he is, lifting a bolter.

Angron smiles at the man's beautiful defiance and slaps the gun aside with the flat of his still revving axe.

'No,' he says, savagely kind. This warrior and his doomed brethren fought well, and their father is careful to offer no humiliation in these last moments.

His other sons, those loyal to him, are chanting his name, shouting it through the ruins. They chant the name his slave-handlers gave to him when he was Lord of the Red Sands. *Angron. Angron. Angron.* He does not know what name the Emperor had intended for him. He never cared enough to ask, and now the chance to do so is denied to him forever.

'Lord.' The dying centurion speaks.

Angron crouches by his son, ignoring the nosebleed trickling down his lips as the Butcher's Nails tick, tick, tick in the back of his brain.

'I am here, Kauragar.'

The World Eater draws in a shivery breath, surely one of his last. His remaining eye seeks his primarch's face.

'That wound at your throat,' Kauragar's words come with blood bubbling at his lips. 'That was me.'

Angron touches his own neck. His fingers come away wet, and he smiles for the first time in weeks.

'You fought well.' The primarch's low tones are almost tectonic. 'All of you did.'

'Not well enough.' The centurion bares blood-darkened teeth in a rictus grin. 'Tell me why, father. Why stand with the Arch-traitor?'

Angron's smile fades, wiped clean by his son's ignorance. None of them have ever understood. They were always so convinced that he should have been honoured by being given a Legion, when the life he chose was stolen from him the day the Imperium tore him away from his true brothers and sisters.

'I do not stand with Horus.' Angron breathes the confession. 'I stand against the Emperor. Do you

understand, Kauragar? I am free now. *Free*. Can you not understand that? Why have you all spent these last decades telling me I should feel honoured to live as a slave, when I was so close to dying free?'

Kauragar stares past his primarch, up at the lightening sky. Blood runs from the warrior's open mouth.

'Kauragar. Kauragar?'

The centurion exhales – a slow, tired sigh. His chest does not rise again.

Angron closes his dead son's remaining eye and rises to his feet. Chains rattle against his armour as he takes up his axes from the ground once more.

Angron. Angron. Angron. His name. A slave's name.

He walks through the ruins, enduring the cheers of his bloodstained followers – warriors concerned with glory and conquest, who were born better than the aliens and traitors they slay. Fighting their own kind is practically the first fair fight they have ever endured, and their gene-sire's lip curls at the thought.

Before he was shackled by the Emperor's will, Angron and his ragged warband defied armies of trained, armed soldiers on his home world. They tasted freedom beneath clean skies and razed the cities of their enslavers.

Now he leads an army fattened by centuries of easy slaughter, and they cheer him the way his masters once cheered when he butchered beasts for their entertainment.

This is not freedom. He knows that. He knows it well.

This is not freedom, he thinks as he stares at the World Eaters screaming his name. *But the fight is only just beginning.*

When the Emperor dies under his axes, when his final thought is of how the Great Crusade was all in pathetic futility, and when his last sight is Angron's iron smile... Then the Master of Mankind will learn what Angron has known since he picked up his first blade.

Freedom is the only thing worth fighting for.

It is why tyrants always fall.

ARTEFACTS

Nick Kyme

‘At the edge of the Ghoul Stars, at the very fringe of Segmentum Ultima, my brother and I united on a mission of mercy. We emerged from warp transit wreathed in tendrils of psychic corposant that clung to the scarred hulls of our ships – but we arrived too late. We had come to rein in a madman, yet could only bear witness to an atrocity.’

Fire crackled beneath the primarch’s words, though T’kell found it hard to discern if the sound came from his lord’s voice or the flaming torches on the walls. Whatever the cause, the air was filled with the reek of hot ash and cinder, carried along by Vulkan’s deep and rumbling baritone.

‘It wasn’t much to see, though I’m not sure if I expected it to be. So different from our home world, one to the other as night is to day… Nocturne is a terrible place to behold and, though I felt no fear as I emerged from my own capsule into the burning dawn, I could appreciate its feral majesty. Tall peaks of fire mountains, long plains of ash and sun-baked deserts, the stink of sulphur from the oceans – it was bracing, deadly. From the void, Nocturne is a deep red orb, a blazing iris of fire. His was a dark, unremarkable world. It looked like a black marble, flawed by the grey smog of its polluted atmosphere.’ Vulkan scowled at the memory, as if he could taste those noxious fumes on his tongue. ‘To be able to see it from orbit, those clouds must have been dense, but I am told they hid a plethora of sin. Even so, it doesn’t justify what he did. What we saw him do.’

A shadow passed across the primarch, the encumbent silence that followed this declaration filled by the sound of his heavy breathing. T’kell realised the heinous act that Vulkan was describing had left a mark deeper than any brand – though whether the perpetrator or the act itself was the cause, he did not know.

‘Darkness veiled it, a curse met out by an ugly moon called Tenebor. Its name meant “shadow”, an apt appellation. Here it was literal, for the moon cast a shroud of night over a world desperately in need of illumination. Before that moment, I hadn’t ever seen his home. Now I never will, and I cannot say I’m sorry. By every account I’ve heard, it was a wretched place, without possibility of transformation.

‘It began as a starburst, noiseless flashes in the vastness of space. They came from a dark, dagger-like vessel – his own flagship. At first, I could not quite reconcile what I was seeing with the deed. Great beams of stabbing light and swarms of torpedoes hurtled down onto his dark world. All attempts to hail his ship failed, of course. Our brother was in the mood for vengeance, not reason. He wanted to smite it, he would declare later, and expunge it of all sin in a single, purifying and insane action. The surface erupted in a chain of stark, flaring blooms and for the first time in its long, benighted history the world saw light. But it was the light of ending.’

Vulkan paused, as if wanting to choose his words carefully and recount what he remembered as clearly as he could.

‘You have to understand, my son, because this is the where the real horror of it all lay – there was precision in that orbital bombardment. He wasn’t just venting his wrath. He knew. Some flaw in the tectonic structure, it doesn’t matter how or where, was targeted directly. I had thought we were witnessing

petulance, the immature act of an immature soul with tragic consequences. But it wasn't. What we saw was premeditated.'

And so it was the perpetrator *and* the deed that had left the primarch so disquieted. T'kell could not imagine having to accept the reality of that. Vulkan went on.

'Cracks split the outer crust along fault lines, then spread, webbing in all directions. Fire colonised the landscape, virulent as a plague, until the entire surface of the world was burning. Then it was no more. In one cataclysmic explosion, its moon and every minor celestial body in sight of this destruction were gone.'

Lowering his head, Vulkan took a moment to regain his composure. When he looked up again his eyes blazed like the fires he had just described, the physical expression of anger he felt towards his brother for unleashing planetary genocide.

'Debris rained against us, stripping shields and battering the armour of our vessels. We rode the shock waves that emanated from the detonation but emerged scathed in ways that went beyond the dents and scrapes clawed into the ship's hull. An immense expulsion of heat faded and in its wake was dust and floating rock.

'Silence reigned for a while, until Horus conquered our collective sense of disbelief and gave us purpose. He was incensed at what our brother had done. He was also determined to run him down. I gave chase alongside, not knowing that Horus had tasked another primarch to slip around undetected. Between the three of us, we bracketed the world-murderer with our ships. There could be no escape. I thought Horus might open fire and kill him for what he had done, but in fact he was determined to redeem him. I wonder had there been one of us to do that later for Horus, would events have taken a different course now?'

Again, Vulkan paused in his iteration, as if imagining a reality where that was true – Horus the loyal son, instead of the rebel.

'It doesn't matter now. Nostramo died in those moments and though none of us could have realised it at the time, so did any chance for Curze's redemption. It all began with him. I think it will probably end that way too.'

T'kell watched his primarch closely, being sure not to speak until Vulkan had finished. Around them, the atmosphere of the forge was soothing, the heat and the penumbral darkness adding solemnity to the primarch's words. Ash and the smell of warm metal were redolent on a shallow breeze, but the sound of hammer strikes against the anvil was quiet for now; the forge's blacksmith had paused in his crafting.

'I can't fathom what must have been going through his mind, my lord. I have seen destruction on such a scale before, but to turn your guns on your own world with the express purpose of destroying it… We are generationally set apart from our sires, but at least I can understand your motivations.'

'But not in this?' asked Vulkan. 'Not in the task I have asked of you?'

'I'll do my duty, primarch,' T'kell answered, somewhat defensively, as though not wanting Vulkan to think he was a poor son.

'But you don't understand the reason.'

T'kell confessed, 'I do not. Not for this.'

Vulkan leaned back in his seat. It was a simple block of stone, carved from the face of the mountain, worn to the primarch's shape by the many hours he had spent sitting and toiling over the artefacts he wrought with his Emperor-given craft. One particularly magnificent specimen was lying on his workbench, now finished. The hammer was a true work of art, and T'kell found his own crafts humbled by the weapon's beauty.

Vulkan saw him admiring it.

‘Do you know why my father made all his sons different?’ he asked.

T’kell shook his head. His war-plate whirred and groaned in sympathy. He had forged the armour himself, and it was as finely artificed as any suit of ceramite and adamantium in the XVIII Legion. Usually, it was crowned with a drake’s head helmet, but T’kell would not dream of wearing that when in conference with his lord. The primarch always insisted on meeting the gaze of his warriors and expected the same in return. He would have reprimanded the forge master if he had hidden his eyes behind retinal lenses.

‘I cannot even pretend to understand the depths of the Emperor’s design or colossal intellect,’ T’kell said humbly.

‘Of course not,’ Vulkan replied without condescension. ‘I believe he did it as part of his vision for the galaxy. Though I know my brother Ferrus would disagree, each of us has an important role to play. Guilliman is the politician, the statesman. Dorn, the keeper of my father’s house, and Russ is the dutiful watchman that keeps us all honest.’

‘Honest?’

Vulkan smiled coldly. ‘A joke that is no longer funny.’

‘And Curze?’ asked T’kell, his desire for knowledge a symptom of his Martian training. ‘What is he?’

Vulkan’s faced darkened.

‘Necessary. Or so we all believed once.’

Mars was the reason for Vulkan’s return to Nocturne and his brief reunion with his forge master. Resupply from the Mechanicum had been sparse and the primarch had been forced to deviate part of his fleet’s course to the one munitions store he could rely on – his own home world. The fact that T’kell was stationed there on the fortress-moon of Prometheus only made it more timely.

‘And Horus, and you?’ T’kell pressed, his eagerness to understand interfering with his sense of propriety.

Vulkan indulged him. ‘Horus was the best of us. Although, in our father’s eyes, we were equals. I always felt like a child in his presence. Unless you’ve met him, it is hard to describe but my brother had this… *way* about him, an undeniable charisma that made you listen to his every word and then believe it without question. Back then, none of us thought anything but absolute loyalty lay in his heart, otherwise we might have realised just how dangerous his persuasive aura could be.

‘His role was leader and once I would have followed him to whatever end and for any purpose. But that pedestal has fallen, and there will be no righting it. As for me…’ Vulkan laughed humourlessly, spreading his arms to encompass the forge and the vault beyond. ‘I am my father’s weapon-maker, but unlike Ferrus or Perturabo, I *specialise* in the unique.’

T’kell’s gaze strayed to the immense vault door that dominated the back wall of the chamber as he recalled the many names and forms of the artefacts within.

‘Like the hammer?’ T’kell said, gesturing to the workbench.

Vulkan turned to regard it, lost for a moment as he ran his hand across *Dawnbringer*’s head, the haft bound in firedrake hide, the gemstones and the esoteric device he had fashioned into its pommel.

‘It is the single finest thing I have ever wrought,’ he told the forge master, ‘but it was never meant for me. I forged it for my brother, for Horus, and that is another reason for the task I must set for you.’

Vulkan left it alone, but did not avert his gaze from the hammer.

‘It was after Nostramo, after Ullanor. My gift to him to commemorate his achievement. With Jaghatai’s help we had captured Curze and brought him to heel. You have to understand, my son, nothing like this had ever happened before. For a primarch to act in the way Curze had, to do what he had done…’

The primarch shook his head.

‘It was unconscionable. Yet, my brother had a solution.’

‘Remake him,’ Horus said proudly, and with enough enthusiasm and vigour to make the Lord of Drakes look up from his brooding.

Horus looked resplendent in his armour, a muscular sheath of pale ivory and jet black. It was a suit so fine that even the great blacksmiter had to admit his envy of it.

He and Vulkan were alone in Horus’s quarters on board the Vengeful Spirit*, sitting in companionable silence when the primarch of the Luna Wolves spoke. They shared a drink together, a heady broth native to Cthonia – Vulkan did not know its name, but appreciated it for its heat and potency.*

He swilled the mixture around the cup, looking into the tiny maelstrom he had made, as if the answer he sought might be waiting for him somewhere within its depths.

Vulkan looked up, his eyes glowing as they always did in the dark confines of Horus’s private chambers. ‘Tell me how, brother, for no one more than I wishes that to be.’

‘We can rehabilitate our brother.’

At first even Horus’s rhetoric could not sway him, and Vulkan looked more aloof than ever, concealed by the shadows. The first primarch’s quarters were functional but well-appointed, even opulent. A fire raged in an ouslite hearth, a concession Vulkan felt sure Horus had made to make his guest more comfortable. Instead, the Lord of Drakes eschewed the light and heat of the fire, wondering why he hadn’t disabused himself of this conference as Jaghatai had, though his gaze occasionally strayed to the flames.

‘After this,’ said Vulkan, angrily jabbing a finger towards the empty darkness and imagining the swathe of atmospheric dust that used to be Nostramo. ‘How?’

Horus smiled in a way that suggested he already knew this would work, and had but to convince Vulkan of it.

‘Each of us shall take him under our wing, nurture him.’ He gestured with his hands, miming the next part. ‘Mould him into the weapon he needs to be, not the jagged implement he is right now.’

Vulkan frowned, thinking of the midnight-clad prisoner they held, doubting the sagacity of his brother’s suggestion.

‘*Think of it like this,’ said Horus, his optimism unwavering. ‘You are a weapon maker,* the *weapon maker. Curze is but an untempered blade that requires its edge honing. Remake him, as you would remake a broken sword, Vulkan.’*

There was a vibrancy to his eyes as Horus made his pitch, his certainty for his wayward brother’s resurgence becoming infectious.

‘I believed him,’ said Vulkan, leaving the past behind. ‘Curze was to be separated from the bulk of his Legion, in the hope that – free of Nostramo’s malign influence – he could change. I would take him first, then Dorn… once he was healed.’

‘Healed?’

Vulkan’s expression turned rueful. His eyes met the forge master’s. ‘Curze had tried to kill Rogal.’

T’kell cursed under his breath at this admission.

‘The Praetorian of Terra?’

‘I know of no other,’ said Vulkan. ‘For Horus’s plan to work, it was vital that the relationship between Dorn and Curze be repaired. But after Kharaatan I knew we had erred. I don’t know whom Horus had planned to put Curze with next, but we didn’t get that far. The demands of the Great Crusade and his new position as Warmaster kept Horus in a distant orbit. I couldn’t attend the Triumph at Ullanor, so I had not seen him in person since Nostramo. Years had passed without word between us, but I knew I must disturb

him for this. I had seen what was within Curze's heart. It was nightmarish and broken. I pitied my brother, hated his deeds but not him, and feared what he would do or become if allowed to continue.

'Horus and I met across a lithocast projection. I had already spoken to Dorn, who had returned to Terra by that point, and we were of the same mind. Foolishly, I thought Horus would be too. His initial greeting was warm enough, if a little more prickly than I had once known.'

'Brother Vulkan, what matter of great import do you come to me with that warrants my time and the disruption of our father's Crusade?'

The Warmaster stood amongst warriors on the bridge of his flagship, an array of sensorium and auguries suggested along the edges of the hololith. He wore different battleplate to their last meeting aboard the Vengeful Spirit*, repainted in the deep sea green of his newly renamed Legion.*

The Sons of Horus.

'The undertone of condescension was hard to miss,' Vulkan said to T'kell. 'I have no doubt it was deliberate.'

'I apologise, brother, for taking you away from your duties, but I believe this matter is dire enough that it must come to your attention.'

Horus's eyes widened and Vulkan could not deny the sense that his brother was mocking him.

'It must*? Well, then you had best speak of it, Vulkan, so I can gauge for myself just how* dire *the matter is.'*

It was more than just the Warmaster's tone that worried Vulkan – something deeper, implied rather than overtly expressed. Though little of the ship was discernible behind Horus in the hololith, there was enough to suggest that it had been changed. Markings that had not been there before, strange symbols Vulkan did not know the meaning or significance of, were partly visible. At first, he considered they might be lodge sigils, as it was Horus who had instigated these traditions within the Legions. Vulkan had eschewed them, despite his brother's overtures, such bonding rituals redundant in the face of the Drake's own Promethean Creed.

But what he saw did not seem entirely related to lodge culture. There was something else, something inscrutable…

'It was as if another being were wearing my brother's skin,' Vulkan explained. 'Yet even that skin, with all its usual trappings, was a darker version of what I knew.'

'You believed him changed?' asked T'kell.

'It was more than that. I recounted what had happened on Kharaatan – Curze's mania, his suicidal, nihilistic tendencies. Despite the strange mood I had found him in, I expected Horus to be appalled.'

Vulkan paused, his jaw hardening at the memory.

'But he laughed,' he said, frowning incredulously. 'I was angry and confused.'

'I see nothing amusing in this, brother,' Vulkan said, wondering what had happened to the noble warrior he had once so admired. 'We have failed.'

Horus's mirth turned to serious intensity. 'On the contrary. You have succeeded.'

'I do not see how.'

'Curze cannot be tamed. His is a necessary evil, a monster to help us win this long war and keep our hands clean.'

'How are they clean? They are tainted just as his, perhaps not with murder, but with complacency in the full knowledge of Curze's homicidal pathology.'

Horus leaned in, his face filling the grainy hololith.

'Every general needs a weapon of terror, an instrument to threaten the hardiest of his enemies with. You have sharpened ours well, Vulkan. From what you've told me, Curze has turned fear into a blade

that I can wield.'

'This is no weapon we should harness. His mind is broken, Horus. He needs help.'

'He's had help. Yours. And I am grateful for it.' Horus leaned back again. 'If there is nothing further?'

'I saw something in Horus,' Vulkan said to T'kell. 'Something that stopped me from replying. It made me withhold the gift I had made for him. It made me realise that my pleas would forever fall on deaf ears. It has also driven me to my decision about the vault. Some weapons are simply too dangerous, in the wrong hands.'

Despite everything he had heard, T'kell still pleaded.

'You are not the leader of a rebellion against the Emperor. It is not your army that we go to censure on Isstvan. You are not Horus.'

Vulkan's eyes strayed to the vault. 'Why is it so important to you that we do not destroy them?'

'Because they are your work and legacy. Destroy them and the galaxy will never see their like again.'

'And would that be such a terrible thing, my son? As weapon maker, I have forged an arsenal that could cause unimaginable death and suffering. That is not a legacy I want.'

'Then why fashion them in the first place?'

Vulkan leaned forward so he could place his hand on T'kell's shoulder. The gesture dwarfed the forge master, but was paternal and reassuring.

'Because it was my purpose, the one my father made me perform, and back then I did not believe any of us *were* the wrong hands. Through Curze and Horus, I now sadly know different. One maniac in our midst, a tragic error of nurture over nature that I can understand and accept. Horus is rational. Not only that, he is the very best of us. I would freely admit that it terrifies me to think of him wilfully inciting rebellion. He is an enemy I would not wish to fight on any level, not least of which because he is my brother. And should my craft, what lies beyond those vault doors, be taken by Horus… I cannot be responsible for that, T'kell.'

Vulkan rose to his feet to declare the matter closed, taking up the hammer *Dawnbringer* as he did so.

'Come. I'll show you what must be done.'

Together they crossed the smoke-thronged forge, their armour reflecting the lambent firelight, until they reached the door of the vault.

It was immense, as was the vault itself, and Vulkan used an icon he had fashioned as part of his armour to unlock it. The small fuller slipped into a recess wrought into the door's ornate surface. It was difficult to see, and T'kell realised he would not have found it without the primarch to show him.

One twist and the cavernous space was filled with the dull clunk of gears, pulleys and chains – the sound of an old mechanism churning to life. After a few seconds the door began to open, slowly but inexorably. It split down the middle, each half opening outwards and into the forge.

When the gap was wide enough, Vulkan stepped through and led T'kell into the vault after him.

As he passed through this slender portal, T'kell marvelled at how thick the doors were, at the sheer incredible artifice of their construction. Despite their ostensible function, they were as beauteous as any of Vulkan's creations. Had Ferrus Manus made these doors they would be cold, ugly things. Impervious, secure, but ultimately bland.

Where the Lord of Iron was a smith, Vulkan was an artisan, or so T'kell believed.

'You are the first and only one of my sons to see this vault,' said Vulkan. 'Held safe within its walls is every artefact I have ever forged.'

Muttering a word of command, Vulkan ignited the braziers around the room. Flickering torchlight cast the contents of the vault in tones of umber and crimson, filling every recess with shadow. Only hints of the

wonders that the primarch had fashioned were revealed.

T'kell recognised some, and knew their names.

Obsidian Chariot.

Vermillion Sphere.

Light of Unmaking.

Some were constructed as simple blades; others were larger, more complex mechanisms. All were named.

Names had power, as Vulkan often said. To name a thing was to give it identity, resonance. An enemy does not fear a man who wields a sword, but would give pause to one who held the *Fangblade of Ignarak*. Such things mattered to the Lord of Drakes and were a part of his teachings.

'Such wonders…' breathed T'kell, scarcely able to comprehend his primarch's magnificent labours.

Vulkan had set the hammer *Dawnbringer* down amongst the other treasures and was about to reach for his spear when he stopped, fingers poised to wrap around the haft. Sword and spear were his preferred weapons, *Thunderhead* having been destroyed earlier during the Great Crusade.

'I hope your indecision represents a change of heart, primarch,' ventured T'kell when he had recovered his composure enough to speak.

'It does not. The artefacts must be destroyed. I am bound for Isstvan so cannot do it myself, which is why you must, T'kell.'

'Then what *is* wrong, primarch?'

Leaving the spear where it stood shackled to the rack, Vulkan took up *Dawnbringer*.

'I believed I had chosen poorly, although this feels right,' he said. 'Fitting. Perhaps its epithet will see my brother illuminated after all.'

T'kell looked on despairingly at the artefacts, desperate to preserve them and his lord's legacy.

'Primarch, I beseech you,' he uttered, bowing to one knee. 'Please do not ask me to do this. At least save *something*.'

Vulkan looked down at his forge master, then to the inside of the vault.

'There are weapons here that can destroy worlds, my son…'

'Or save them from destruction,' T'kell replied, looking up at his lord, 'in the *right* hands.'

'Mine?' asked Vulkan, meeting the forge master's pleading gaze.

'Yes! Or Lord Dorn, or Guilliman. Even Russ!'

Vulkan held T'kell's gaze a moment longer before turning away.

'Rise, forge master. I would not have one of my sons beg me on his knees.' There was a snarl in Vulkan's voice and for an instant T'kell thought he might have overstepped.

'I am driven to it, primarch.'

'Very well.'

'My lord?'

Vulkan faced him.

'I said, very well. Something should remain. If I destroy everything, then I have given up on hope and seeing loyalty and honour endure in my brothers. I won't do that.'

T'kell visibly relaxed, the relief at his primarch's words evident on his face.

'You are to remain here, T'kell. You won't come to the Isstvan System – your place is now on Nocturne and Prometheus.'

'But, primarch–'

'Do not defy me a second time,' Vulkan warned. 'I am not *that* tolerant.'

T'kell bowed his head in contrition.

‘You shall become Forgefather, and keeper of the artefacts in this vault.’

‘Forgefather?’ asked T’kell, frowning. ‘Am I not your forge master, my lord?’

‘Of course. A legionary can be more than one thing, T’kell. I am entrusting you with this duty, just as I entrusted you with the vault.’

‘What duty, primarch? Name it, and it shall be done.’

‘To act as custodian. To swear you will protect these artefacts and should anything happen to me, ensure they are well hidden, far from those who would seek to use them poorly.’

T’kell saluted vehemently. ‘I swear it, Lord Vulkan.’

‘Good. Choose seven to remain, and only seven. One for each of our realms on Nocturne.’

‘There are thousands in here, primarch. How can I possibly–’

‘Indeed there are,’ said Vulkan, tying the hammer off around his belt and reaching for his gauntlet. Kesare’s drake scale mantle was already hanging around his broad shoulders. ‘Seven, Forgefather, that is what your primarch decrees.’ Vulkan was leaving, his mind now firmly on a reckoning with Horus.

‘I go to join with Ferrus’s fleet,’ he called back to T’kell. ‘See it is done before I return.’

He walked away bound for the spaceport, leaving T’kell behind.

The Forgefather regarded the contents of the vault, trying to contemplate the impossible task before him.

‘Seven…’

HANDS OF THE EMPEROR

Rob Sanders

The cavernous corridors of the Imperial Palace echoed with the rhythmic clatter of armour plate. The foot knights of the Legio Custodes marched with brazen purpose, the synchronised movement of ceramite and gold an elevated heartbeat in the hallowed halls. It was the sound of tranquil urgency – of vigilance, noble and true.

Shield-Captain Enobar Stentonox was part of that vigilance, and had been for a long time. Today was different, however. Today he felt his own heart beating to the same rhythm as his marching step. Today he had the Palace watch: his first. For twenty-four hours, the security of the Imperial Palace – and by extension, of the Emperor himself – was in Stentonox's hands.

More than just a wonder crafted in blood and stone, the colossal Palace was many things to many people. To the Custodian Guard it was both security-sanctum and protectorate. To the primarch Rogal Dorn it was a bastion to fortify. To the army of ambassadors and Administratum officials that swarmed its halls, it was the heart of human governance. To the trillions of citizens on Ancient Terra and the worlds beyond, it was the centre of the known galaxy. As Master of the Watch, Stentonox would need to meet the competing demands of such roles, whilst maintaining the inviolate preservation of the Emperor's person within the Palace's mighty walls.

The shield-captain's steps were long with pride, but also heavy – not just with the ceremonial bulk of his plate, but also the crushing burden of his responsibilities. As his rattling stride took him through the Belvedereon Great Hall, he passed a marble statue of the Emperor. Couched in metaphor, it depicted the Emperor at the Declaration of Unity, balancing Terra upon one globed shoulder. For a moment, Stentonox allowed himself the indulgence of equating the honour and encumbrance to his own.

As the Great Hall became the Colonnade Simulacrux, Stentonox's march fell into step with the party of Custodians making their brisk way up the vaulted and pillar-lined passage. The architectural theme of the Great Hall had spilled out into the colossal space, and many heroes of the Unification Wars – including members of the Emperor's personal guard – were immortalised in the stone of the columns. One of these giants also strode up the grand colonnade in the flesh, leading the party that Stentonox had joined.

Constantin Valdor.

A loyal Terran, Captain-General of the Legio Custodes and Chief Custodian of the Emperor of Mankind – in that order – he walked the lofty corridors of his master's fortified palace. Brazier light dappled the golden brilliance of his battleplate, while the red of his robes honoured the blood historically spilled in the effort to safeguard his Emperor. Stentonox suspected that there would be a great deal more blood spilled in the near future.

Flanked by members of his Ares Guard, Valdor was attended upon, at Stentonox's arrangement, by the Sentinel-Securitas Justinian Arcadius. Like a small continent, the dimensions of the Palace were broad and wide, but the Captain-General's itinerarium – known only to a few, including the Master of the Watch – now placed Valdor in the Upper Ward, which was where Stentonox had intended to meet him for the

dawn report. Like a wall of beaten bronze perpetually at their back, the Custodian Dreadnought Indemnion tramped up the corridor with hydraulic menace. Its aged hull streamed with the aegis honours and ribbon banners of its own decorated service to the Emperor.

Despite the early hour, the Captain-General had a smile for Stentonox, though the shield-captain doubted that Valdor had seen the inside of his personal chambers in several days. 'Your first Palace watch?'

'Yes, Captain-General,' Stentonox confirmed.

'Then I wish you a quiet duty,' Valdor said. 'Though they rarely are.'

'If you have any advice to offer, Captain-General, then I would be glad of its guidance.'

The Chief Custodian grunted with good humour. 'Don't get too attached to your protocols and regulata. Schedules are usually shattered by the second hour. Think of the solemn observance of our responsibilities as written in stone – but freshly inscribed in volcanic rock. Each day brings new challenges that test our routines, fresh eruptions that turn the cold certainty of ritual and order to situations that are fast moving and fluid. You must live the contradiction of being adaptable, and yet unyielding. And know that the word that will fall from your lips most often today will be "no". Anything else, shield-captain?'

'No, Chief Custodian.'

'Then let us proceed with the dawn report.'

As Stentonox took his Captain-General through the matters of the day, with Arcadias filling in the blanks, his mind moved from one weighty consideration to another. The morning alone was an agitated crowd of duties and responsibilities to push through, each vying for his urgent attention. There were defensive vulnerabilities created by the Warmason's work on the Byzan Wall. One of Valdor's auric-envoys, Abhorsiax, was returning from Old Aethiopia, where the Chief Custodian had sent him to arbitrate the labour wars that had broken out between the Danakil mineral conglomerates and Hive Abyssin. The recently trialled protectorate rotations operating out of the Dolorite quad-bastions still required refinement. Consuls from the Collegia Titanica were requesting a baptismal Palace walk-by, involving the newly constructed Warlord-class Battle Titan *Vigilantia Victrum*, which the Chief Custodian was almost certain to reject out of committee. Papers, references and pict-files on the forty or so Palace sub-ambassador appointees still required the Chief Custodian's seal. A consignment of breaching munitions due for delivery to the Palace armouries had understandably not materialised from Mars, but the consignment's replacement order had similarly not arrived on schedule from the forge world of Phaeton. The Legio Custodes fleet of orbital monitors were well overdue an inspection. The Grand Provost Marshal of the Adeptus Arbites had requested an audience to discuss the dangers posed by a number of seditionist movements, all speaking against the Emperor, as well as a recent incident involving a troubled citizen firing a shot at one of the Palace's street-level barbicans, only to be killed in return fire by the Custodian foot knight on duty there. Witchseekers of the Silent Sisterhood were convening to discuss the maintenance of the Palace defences that no one could actually see – the Emperor's immaterial security measures. Beyond these existing matters of gravity, both Stentonox, as Master of the Watch, and the Chief Custodian had several dozen lesser meetings and consultation sessions – more, now that the shield-captain had completed his watch report.

'Thank you,' Valdor said to the shield-captain. 'Arcadius, is there anything else?'

As the sentinel-securitas checked his lists, their group approached a towering sentry gate. The arch's barricade was raised and hung over a pair of Aquila Terminators like a bad omen. The bulkheads were one of the many improvements that Rogal Dorn had approved for the Palace interior. Every grand design and architectural flourish now had to be adapted to new purpose: the high, decorative archways occurring at intervals down the arterial corridors were now tri-layered barricade-bulkheads, that would come down

in the event of wall-breaches and slow the advance of an enemy force through the Palace.

The sentries bowed low – despite it being difficult to do so in their Tactical Dreadnought plate – and rested their helmets against the ceremonial halberds they clutched before them. As the Captain-General, sentinel-securitas and Master of the Watch passed, the pair rose back to their impressive height, resuming their silent vigil like golden gargoyles.

Arcadias only had one other order of business: a report that Stentonox had requested himself.

'The nodical-session Blood Games are almost at an end,' Arcadius told them, and Valdor nodded with approval. With intelligence pointing to a security threat that was only growing in imminence, the Captain-General had doubled the theatre-diagnostic, pitting the best he had from the ranks of the Legio Custodes against the Palace defences. The sentinel-securitas examined both failures and near-successes to anticipate possible enemy strategies and review the Emperor's security. With the galaxy in turmoil and Valdor's days increasingly dominated by actual threats rather than hypothetical ones, the Chief Custodian had less time for the tactical rituals. It had been Stentonox's relative success in a previous round of the Blood Games that had elevated him to shield-captain, and he thought to rekindle the Chief Custodian's appetite for updates. It had worked.

'Any surprises?' Valdor asked.

'Jerichstein was intercepted in Hive Persepol,' Arcadius confirmed. 'Ran into some trouble with an entire precinct of Arbitrators. Nicator was taken by one of our gunships during a pursuit over the Caucasus. A servo-drone picked up Einocratus while mapping a section of ancient sewerage trenches beneath the Palace. The Fourth Ward fire was started by Caesarion, and Gesh was responsible for the Black Sentinels and foot knights missing from their sentry-points in the hanging gardens. But they both failed isometrics at the Cantica-Consentrica, Barbican East. I fear they were working together, which is of course prohibited by the rules of the Games.'

'The enemy won't play by our rules,' Valdor said. 'Will they, Stentonox?'

'It is difficult enough to get our allies to do so, most of the time,' the shield-captain offered.

'Exactly,' Valdor agreed.

'Which is why I've taken the unusual step of both commending and censuring the pair of them simultaneously,' Arcadius said.

Valdor laughed. 'Kalibos?'

'Taken climbing the Maximillias Wall – previously identified as a weak spot in our surveillance,' the sentinel-securitas informed Valdor.

'Did you not favour the Maximillias Wall with your infiltration?' the Chief Custodian asked Stentonox.

'The Espartic Wall, my lord.'

'Not an easy climb,' Valdor said.

'Difficult by design. Soon to be made impossible,' Stentonox said, nodding to Arcadius and adding a mental note to his duties for the day.

'But Kalibos was taken?'

Arcadias confirmed it. 'But he did not concede easily. Four of my sentinels are in the infirmatory.'

'And Zantini?'

'Made it through to the Halls Econium disguised as a plenipotente from the Technovingian Sovereignty, but the new frequency fields installed beneath the flags unmasked him.'

'But they're getting closer,' Valdor admitted.

'Their near-successes honour us,' Arcadius said. 'But with every cycle of the Games we learn more of the arts of infiltration. The weaknesses and complacencies our enemies will use against us.'

'Any Custodians outstanding?'

‘One,’ Arcadius told Valdor and the shield-captain. ‘Belisarius.’

Stentonox prided himself on knowing all of the Custodians he worked with, but he knew some better than others, and Belisarius he barely knew at all.

‘His genotrace was identified by syn-grids in the Kaspasian Basin,’ Arcadius continued, ‘at Sinai-Persis and Hive Saqqara. Travelling west, away from the Palace. Perhaps his approach was compromised by these recent captures.’

As they approached the giant statue-lined galleries of the Bronze Arcade, the burnished doors of the Heliosicon Tower parted to reveal the large grav-carriage and its pair of passengers. Sister-Commandress Duesstra Edelstyne was a blistering vision in silver plate and rich furs. An ornate half-helm covered her stapled lips, the vaulting nose guard of which cut between the dark intensity of her eyes. At her side stood a shaven-headed novice glossator.

As a Sister of Silence, Edelstyne was Confidente-Tranquil to Lady Krole herself and ranking maiden among the Raptor Guard allocated to the Palace’s First Ward. Her sisters were stationed throughout, attending meetings in silence and standing sentinel in the halls and corridors, not unlike their Custodian counterparts; in many ways, her role was analogous to Stentonox’s own. While providing empyreal protection in the Palace against witchbreeds and their invasive, immaterial probings, the Sisterhood’s warriors were also welcome additions to the Palace security forces.

But this necessitated coordination, and an obligatory meeting between Edelstyne and the Master of the Watch. Stentonox had scheduled the time and the place but this was neither. He acknowledged the silent stab of her glare with a nod, but turned his attention back to the Chief Custodian.

‘Sounds like Belisarius just doesn’t want the game to end,’ Valdor said. ‘But then again, who does? Monitor his progress. Keep me posted.’

Arcadius nodded. ‘Thank you, Chief Custodian.’

‘And good luck to you, shield-captain.’

‘Thank you, Captain-General,’ replied Stentonox. He saluted before Valdor, Indemnion and the Ares Guard peeled off into a chasmal corridor.

‘Commandress,’ Stentonox boomed across the arcade. ‘What can I do for you?’

Her gauntlets signed out a rapid series of gestures, the speed and insistency of which even the shield-captain could interpret as urgent. From the tender lips of the novice glossator came the translation.

‘Shield-Captain Stentonox. There is something you should see.’

The Heliosicon Tower was one of the tallest thrusting skyward from the Imperial Palace. It was so called because of the views it commanded of the Terran sun rising above the chromatic haze of atmospheric pollution. The bulbous minaret at the top boasted not only its own donjon and signum-complex, but also crenellated terraces outfitted both decoratively for observation, and defensively with interceptor missile launchers.

As the bronze doors slid open, Stentonox strode out onto the first terrace, accompanied by Arcadius and the two women. A Custodian tower sentry fell briefly to one knee as the Master of the Watch passed, but Edelstyne and her novice followed without acknowledgement, the sunlight glinting off their polished battleplate. Edelstyne signed.

‘There.’ The novice glossator pointed out to the south-west.

Stentonox followed her direction out over the haze, across the excavation-mauled plateaus of the Himalazia. Something was emerging from the tarnished clouds beyond. Something *huge*.

From its size, it could only be one of Terra’s great orbital plates, grazing the planet’s upper atmosphere and moving slowly, but surely, over the mountain peaks. While each orbital plate was different – no less

the victims of hideous engineering enhancements and ungainly accretions than the hives that housed billions at ground level – this one reminded Stentonox of some colossal, flattened jellyfish. The greater metropol-platform was like a parasol, with a nest of sky docks, stratomoorings and the orbital's gravitic engine column hanging down through the clouds beneath it. From the shape of its silhouetted outline, the colossal plate looked like Arcus, one of the smaller orbital conurbatia.

What alarmed the shield-captain was the fact that the swarm of tugs and shunt-craft manoeuvring the humongous plate seemed to be dragging it *towards* the Imperial Palace.

Stentonox and Arcadius exchanged glances of simultaneous realisation and alarm.

'Patch me through to the signum-complex,' the shield-captain ordered. Arcadius nodded and conferred briefly with the tower sentry.

A voice came across the encrypted vox-channel. '*Signata-Heliosicon for the Master of the Watch.*'

'This is Shield-Captain Enobar Stentonox,' he replied. 'Ident – Tarantis, Halcyon, three-fifty-two, sixty-four. Confirm.'

'*Confirmed, shield-captain. Standing by.*'

'Heliosicon,' Stentonox said. 'I am on the battle-terraces of your tower and I am looking at what appears to be an orbital about to breach both Palace air and void-space. Confirm for me, please.'

'*Confirmed, shield-captain. We have orbital plate Arcus on a Himalazian approach vector.*'

'Negative, Heliosicon Tower, negative. Orbital plates do not have trajectory clearance to pass over the Imperial Palace.'

'Arcus Orbital has clearance, shield-captain,' the tower voxed back. '*Special dispensatorial order, Metacarp Three-Sixteen.*'

'Clarify special order, tower.'

'That's a Legiones Astartes code,' Arcadius told Stentonox. 'Imperial Fists. It'll be the Warmason, or Dorn himself.'

'Tower, I am Master of the Watch – how could I not have been informed of this?' The vox went silent. 'Heliosicon Tower, respond.'

'*We're collating that data for you now–*'

'No,' Stentonox interrupted. 'Connect me to the ranking authority on Arcus right now.'

'*Yes, shield-captain.*'

'This is a mistake,' Stentonox told Arcadius, his voice threaded with steely authority. 'An oversight of monumental proportions. I want to know how this happened.'

Under the stabbing glare of Duesstra Edelstyne, Stentonox waited, the orbital plate moving through the clouds, kilometre by kilometre, into the Palace's airspace. At first, Stentonox was patched through to the orbital's stratoport admiral, who could not help him; then through a selection of gubernatorials, proctors and berg marshals who claimed that their authority on the plate had been superseded. Finally, with his anger rising, Stentonox was connected to the high commissary of the Danakil conglomerates, who told him that Arcus was currently under their mercantile sovereignty.

'Commissary,' Stentonox voxed, making each word sharp and clear. 'This is Shield-Captain Enobar Stentonox of the Legio Custodes. I am giving you a direct order – cease your approach. Your vector and presence in our airspace have not been cleared with us. You are in violation of aegis protocols and imperata of the highest–'

'*Heliosicon Tower*,' a voice intruded, as deep and sharp as Stentonox's own. '*This is Captain Demetrius Katafalque of the Imperial Fists Legion. I am in command aboard Arcus. This orbital will not slow or alter its vector. My orders are to see us in anchorage above the Fourth Ward and the concentrica between the inner and outer walls. These are my primarch's orders and it is not for me to*

deny them. Check your protocols, Heliosicon Tower. Check your protocols.'

'Arcadias?' Stentonox said grimly.

The sentinel-securitas turned from his conference with the tower sentry and the signum-complex.

'Special dispensatorial order "Metacarp Three-Sixteen" authorises Arcus to moor above the Palace and supply millions of workers from the Danakil mineral conglomerates to the Warmason Vadok Singh, for the purposes of improving the Palace fortifications,' Arcadias reported. 'The orbital is to remain, providing mobile quarters for the imported workforce.'

Stentonox shook his head. 'How could we not know about this?'

'Metacarp Three-Sixteen is still in committee. Lord Dorn must be pushing ahead with the fortifications. It is unlikely that the primarch will be denied, given the present situation, but an objection was lodged with the Administrator Primus and a hearing scheduled. We have not been informed, because Three-Sixteen has not yet been authorised.'

'Who lodged the objection?' Stentonox asked.

After a moment's further clarification, the sentinel-securitas told him. 'Luna did – Lady Krole of the Silent Sisterhood.'

The pair of Custodians turned to Duesstra Edelstyne. The commandress gave a shrug of her armoured shoulders that needed no translation.

'Captain Katafalque,' Stentonox voxed. 'This is Enobar Stentonox, Master of the Watch. Your breach of our airspace puts the Imperial Palace and the Emperor at intolerable risk. The orbital plate Arcus is not authorised to be here. I urge you, captain – order your tugs to take Arcus away from this approach vector.'

'*Rogal Dorn does not have time to waste on your meaningless bureaucracy*,' Katafalque returned brusquely. '*Permissions have been sought. Check your protocols. I have authorisation from my primarch, just as he has authorisation to fortify the Imperial Palace. These are my orders*.'

'I cannot allow–'

'*These are my orders*,' Katafalque repeated, '*and I intend to follow them. I have no more choice in that than the sun has in rising above the horizon. Do what you must, shield-captain. This is Arcus, inbound on vector-Himalazia. Katafalque out.*'

'Katafalque!' Stentonox called down the vox, but the Imperial Fist was gone.

Stentonox didn't speak for a few moments. Both Arcadias and Edelstyne stared at the shield-captain in silence as Stentonox glared at the distant orbital plate.

'Arcadias.'

'Yes, shield-captain.'

'Contact Damari Ambramagne aboard the *Aeriax*,' Stentonox ordered. 'Tell him I want all available Legio Custodes gun-skiffs on station above the Fourth Ward, vector-Himalazia.'

Arcadias nodded, but said nothing.

'You think it premature?' Stentonox asked.

'No, shield-captain.'

'Good, because next I want you to signal-crash the Palace. Take us to Defence Readiness Xanthus. All Custodians, Sisters, armsmen and... aye, even the Imperial Fists, are to assume their alert postings, and await further orders.'

'What about the Chief Custodian?'

'Inform him of our defence readiness and status,' Stentonox said, his instructions heavy with the accountability they carried. 'And ask him to attend me on the battlements, for it is he who shall be issuing those orders.'

As the orbital plate descended, it eclipsed the bleak light of the rising sun. The Palace citadels and towers – having felt the reaching touch of dawn's light – were now plunged back into gloom. Terraces, parapets and balconades were crowded with Palace officiates and visitors, all alerted to the emergency by the sounding of situation-Xanthus alarms and the rapid movement of Palace defence forces. Viewing glasses, magnoculars and fearful faces were directed skywards to the monstrous approach of Arcus and the triple-tier lines of engagement being formed by the Legio Custodes gunships.

Like a wall of gold plate, ornamentation and ordnance, the gun-skiffs, stratobastia and grav-monitors of the Legio Custodes extended the Palace defences into the sky. The battle line was pugnacious and imposing. The craft held position above the slums and conurbatia bordering the outer fortifications and walled enclaves of the Palace, and presented their ornate gunnery to Arcus.

The colossal size of the orbital plate put it into an altogether different target category. As Arcus's approach swiftly became the unstoppable force to the gun-skiffs' immovable line of defence, a chorus of consternation rose from the gathered crowds upon the battlements and platforms of the Palace.

From the flight deck of the *Aeriax*, Stentonox could survey the under-plate of Arcus. Leaving the sentinel-securitas to manage defence readiness about the Palace, Stentonox had accompanied the Chief Custodian up to the gun-skiff. Constantin Valdor had been in hololithic conference with Demetrius Katafalque of the Imperial Fists for only a few minutes, but the Captain-General was already infuriated. Pledges of mutual respect and fraternity descended quickly into a debate as to what was in the best interests of the Emperor's security. Katafalque claimed that his primarch's word was inviolable. Valdor reminded the captain that the Imperial Fists were welcome guests on Terra, but that the Emperor's security – and that of the Imperial Palace – had ever been the principal concern of the Legio Custodes. Anger got the better of men who should have been above such pettiness. Insults fell from noble lips. Threats were exchanged. Punishments were promised.

'He's gone again, my lord,' a deck menial reported as the link was cut.

'Damn the Legiones Astartes and their upstart pride,' Valdor seethed. 'If it were not for such audacity there would be no need to fortify the Emperor's Palace at all.'

'Indeed, Chief Custodian,' agreed Stentonox.

'No service,' Valdor said, 'even one assumed in a master's name, should imperil the master served.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'It is madness,' Valdor muttered, almost to himself. 'It's officious madness, and it must be stopped.'

'What are your orders, Captain-General?'

Valdor stared out across the flight deck of the *Aeriax*. The sky was gone. There was only the orbital plate – its stratomoorings, skydocks and platforms creeping irresistibly towards them, dominating the deck view. 'The tugs and tenders?' he asked.

'I have gunships standing by to board or cripple them,' Stentonox reported. 'But in truth, inertial drift alone will carry Arcus to anchorage above the Fourth Ward.'

'Then let us not waste time with that,' Valdor said. 'Opinion, shield-captain?'

'Calibrated reversal of Arcus's gravitic drives will slow the orbital before bringing it to a stop.'

Valdor nodded gravely. Nobody on the flight deck spoke as the Chief Custodian weighed danger against danger. The decision did not come easily to the Captain-General, but when it did it was delivered with confidence and grim determination.

'Shield-captain?'

'Yes, sir?'

'Seize the plate.'

In a slow broadside of gold, their grav-attack craft streamed away from the launch bays of the Legio Custodes ships; the stately battle line was a vision to behold as it closed upon the great gravitic engine column and passed below the orbital under-plate. Through his transport's gunnery embrasure, Shield-Captain Stentonox caught sight of thousands of indentured workers watching in horror from the projecting observation decks. Stentonox could only imagine the confusion of the common man, as the reverent servants of the Emperor went head to head in the skies over Terra.

He would preferred to have made a more direct insertion, but could not risk taking his grav-transports any closer to the structure. The powerful inverse fields fluxing about the gravitic drives and suspensor vanes would play havoc with the polarity of their own power plants. Stentonox had been warned that the grav-attacks could literally drop out of the sky – therefore, a safer, if less convenient, insertion site had been identified. The Legio Custodes would simply have to advance through the generatorium decks and take the engineering section at the head of the column by force.

'Custodian,' Stentonox said to Gustus Doloran, his Cataphractii sergeant-at-arms. 'Extend Captain Katafalque my compliments and inform him that I intend to fire upon Arcus. Tell him that for the safety of his warriors, he should withdraw from the shell sections and platforms about the engine column.'

'Very good, sir,' Doloran replied from the depths of his golden Terminator plate.

Stentonox was confronted with an almost impossible task – here, on the orbital plate, he would need to combine his many years of both combat training and diplomacy. Constantin Valdor had commanded that Arcus be taken, but Stentonox was fully aware that in these times of distrust and rebellion, he could not afford to slaughter the VII Legion above the Imperial Palace. Like the pugilist paid to throw the fight, he would have to pull his punches.

Unlike the pugilist, he still needed to win. A victory swift and unequivocal.

The impending action was a logistical and diplomatic nightmare. It made the shield-captain's mind ache with the unruly possibilities of chance.

'No reply from the plate, sir,' the sergeant-at-arms reported.

Stentonox nodded. 'Tell Captain Ambramagne that he is cleared to fire.'

'Very good, sir.'

'And open a channel to our attack craft, if you please.'

'Open, shield-captain.'

'Custodians, this is the Master of the Watch. We have a daunting task ahead of us, a task I expect you to carry out with your usual precision and determination. The Space Marines aboard Arcus are our allies, but they are operating outside their jurisdiction. It falls to us to assert the supreme authority of the Emperor of Mankind, even amongst his most loyal servants. We will do this by force, if required. Your Captain-General has ordered the orbital plate taken. It will be so, but you will take no life in the execution of such orders. There will be *no killing*. Those are my orders. I am invoking battle proprieties. As our comrades-at-arms, I want all Imperial Fists classed as *decora-intelligenta*. Come the conclusion of this unfortunate action they will be questioned, and they will be debriefed, but they will be *alive*. But while you should consider their lives sacred, their blood is not. Punish them as your pride dictates. We may break them, but we will not butcher them. The galaxy has witnessed enough of such endings.'

'Aeriax firing, shield-captain,' Sergeant Doloran informed him.

'Stand by,' Stentonox voxed. 'Ten seconds.'

A storm of fire erupted from the presented cannons of the skiffs and gunships, hammering into the shell plating of the engine column. Thick beams and blasts turned the generatorum decks of the column into maelstroms of light, sound and twisted metal. With the gunners' aim avoiding any of the critical systems keeping the orbital plate afloat, the grav-attacks of the Legio Custodes followed the bombardment in

through the surface shielding and the wreckage of the hull superstructure.

Arcus wasn't a military installation, and boasted no defensive weaponry of its own, but the atmospheric locks and thick metal shell of the exterior still presented an obstacle to arriving forces. In ordering the barrage, Stentonox had removed that obstacle.

'Custodians, disembark.'

The brazen doors of the grav-attack craft slid open. Foot knights, Custodians and Aquila Terminators stepped out into the inferno raging between the ruined decks. The reflected flames turned each warrior into a spectacle of blinding gold. Striding through the destruction, their towering helms scraping the ceiling and guardian spears cutting wreckage confidently from their path, the Custodians assumed formation on the blazing decks.

'Pattern Draco,' Stentonox ordered.

Moving away from the destruction and into the narrow corridors of the generatoria chambers, the invaders assumed a demi-sheltron formation, with foot knights hunkered and advancing through the engine column behind their thick, gilded shields, Custodian Guard squads aimed the boltguns of their power halberds across their comrades' pauldrons. Between them, Custodians in Cataphractii Terminator plate settled the barrel lengths of aquila-nozzled incinerators. Not only did the formation create a shield-wall for its conquering advance, but also extended a wall of flame that drove back potential defenders.

Moving with his command squad through the generatorium complex, Stentonox had Doloran relay his cautionary commands while Sergeant Memnon coordinated the advance.

'Anything?' Stentonox asked. It took a moment to recall confirmations from the advance teams spread out through the occupied decks.

'No contacts on auspex,' Doloran told him. 'No sightings.'

Stentonox grunted – that was either very good, or very bad. Demetrius Katafalque, confronted with the reality of an atmospheric assault and occupation of the plate, might have reconsidered his former bullishness, although Stentonox thought this unlikely. The Imperial Fists were experts in siege warfare, and in even the short window of opportunity provided, they could have mounted a determined defence. The narrow corridors of the generatoria were not without strategic virtue and Katafalque had, if he required, millions of indentured innocents to put between himself and the Custodians. With the passageways and engineering sections empty, it seemed that Katafalque had decided to make use of neither.

As he advanced, the shield-captain's unease grew. Following their explosive entrance, the Custodians' unimpeded progress had taken them through the silent decks, almost halfway to their destination. Even if Katafalque had acknowledged his courteous warning and withdrawn everyone from the outer sections, Stentonox would have expected some resistance by now. At this rate, their mission would be completed within minutes and Arcus force-anchored to a dead stop.

Stentonox's mind raced. This wasn't right.

He thought of Demetrius Katafalque, his predicament no more comfortable than the shield-captain's own. The Imperial Fists captain wanted loyalist blood on his gauntlets no more than Stentonox did. Like the shield-captain, Katafalque would recognise the conflict as a diplomatic nightmare; perhaps, like Stentonox, he had also prohibited the use of deadly force. Taking the orbital plate under such restrictions was difficult enough. How could–

'Captain Katafalque's compliments, sir,' said the sergeant-at-arms, announcing the opening of a new vox-channel.

'Connect us,' Stentonox said, as they entered the engineering section.

'*Shield-captain.*' The Imperial Fist's dour voice echoed about Stentonox's high-helm.

‘Captain.’

‘*I extend the same courtesy that you did me*,’ Katafalque said. ‘*Withdraw your men from the engineering section. Now.*’

‘Demetrius, wait,’ Stentonox called, but a burst of static told him that the captain was gone.

As step after armoured step took them closer to their objective, Stentonox tried to put himself in Katafalque’s position. How would *he* stop the Custodian advance, without the wilful spilling of blood?

The shield-captain’s steps slowed. His visored helm drifted towards the deck.

‘Sergeant-at-arms...’

‘Yes, shield-cap–’

The detonations came from above and below. They were probably seismic charges, transported in with the indentured labour force for the Warmason’s excavations, set into the perimeter of the structural deck and floor plating.

Metal groaned. Beams fractured. Secondary blasts erupted.

Six floors in the engineering section – through which the different Custodian teams were advancing – simply fell out of the orbital plate.

The timing was perfect. The deadweight of girders, decking and industrial machinery was dragged instantly downwards. There was no time for orders. No vox-transmissions.

As the deck fell away and the buckled ceiling came down to meet him, Stentonox fought against every instinct and moved *towards* the detonations. Two steps across the falling floor took him to within leaping distance of the chamber’s edge – the jump was heavy and awkward, but it gave the shield-captain the lift he needed. Clawing at the wall with his gilded gauntlets, he latched onto a ragged ledge where the structural supports had been ripped away.

Hanging by his fingertips, Stentonox looked down. The mass of wreckage buckled and crumbled into sections, falling away with the damaged plate hull. Custodians scrambled. Some found their way to the outstretched gauntlets of their anchored comrades. Some were snatched back by rearguard warriors who had yet to enter the engineering section. The rest tumbled with the descending wreckage, holding on to floor sections or machinery as it fell through the bottom of the under-plate.

The shield-captain’s arm shot out for a flailing foot knight toppling from the deck above and still clutching his shield. Stentonox snatched him out of the air, the digits of his gauntlet like a grapnel that buried themselves in the plates of the Custodian’s armour. Heaving the warrior up to a hold on the ledge, Stentonox adjusted his own precarious grip. It reminded him of the Espartic Wall – that torturous climb of one of the Palace’s most challenging fortifications. Many veterans among their number been forced to scale such obstacles as part of the ritual Blood Games. Stentonox could only hope that their training had not been forgotten.

‘Name?’ Stentonox put to the foot knight beside him.

‘Vega, sir.’

With one hand the Custodian took off his helmet and stared down at the dizzying vision of Terra that had opened up before them. He was shorter than most among the Legio Custodes, but squat and hungry for action. He spat his shock and disgust into the open void below.

Like other Custodians about the empty chamber’s ragged perimeter, Stentonox heaved himself up to a more secure perch, and Vega did likewise. The wind howled about them. Beneath the orbital plate – kilometres beneath, in fact – the shield-captain could see the distant Himalazian landscape. Even from this height, he could make out the conurbatia bordering the concentric outer walls of the Imperial Palace.

The wreckage of the engineering decks disintegrated as it fell, crashing down along the busy architecture of the column’s starboard side, scattering grav-foils, aerials and suspensor vanes. Stentonox tried to

imagine the horror of those poor souls on the ground beneath them, looking up at this unfolding nightmare. He also watched his gold-plated Custodians tumble and fall through the descending debris, their crimson cloaks whipping violently about them as they grew smaller and smaller to his eyes.

The immense energies of the gravitic drives exerted their pull upon the wreckage as it reached the strongest part of the conical field beneath Arcus. Shrieking and grinding, and in total defiance of the laws of physics, the remains of the shattered decks billowed outwards, scattering the last of the tiny golden figures towards the column's surface before settling into a lazy, listless tumble around it. Rather than plummeting all the way to the surface and inflicting untold devastation at ground level, the debris began to *orbit* the orbital.

It was an incidental effect of the plate's construction, but one that would save the lives of Stentonox's men. For now, at least.

Some tried to angle their descent and kick away from twisted support struts and heavy metal decking. Instead of falling through screaming emptiness, they smashed through nests of antennae and vanes on the gravitic engine column itself. The shield-captain was horrified at those velocity-arresting impacts; the rending and crumpling of armour plate as Custodians came to a precarious stop, tangled in the busy column sensoria. One warrior outfitted in heavy Cataphractii plate crashed straight down through the mesh of several maintenance platforms before clawing his way to a halt on the shell plating of the column's lowermost point.

Then Stentonox saw Doloran, the sergeant-at-arms clinging like a bulky, brazen gargoyle to what was left of the ruined deck immediately below them.

'Transports,' the shield-captain called out across the vox. 'This is Stentonox. Custodians overboard. I repeat – Custodians overboard. Track suit signatures and attempt a vectored rescue. Advise caution, wreckage in the air.'

'*Shield-captain*,' a Custodian aboard one grav-attack replied. '*The fields about the gravitic column…*'

Stentonox smacked an armoured fist against the metal of the wall section. 'Damn you,' he barked back. 'You will *attempt* an intervention. You will not put Legio Custodes transports or personnel at risk.'

'*Received*.'

Within moments, Stentonox saw the small swarm of transports dropping into view, their hulls turning with the vectored descent and the gravitic acceleration of their own engine coils.

'Custodians on the column,' Stentonox called across the open channel, with no idea if they could hear him or not, 'you are authorised to shed your plate, if required.' It was largely pointless advice, but it was all that he could give them. It might provide the warriors with something to concentrate on other than their impending death. 'In the event of freefall, use–'

Bolter fire suddenly cut through the cold air before the shield-captain. On the far side of the wind-screeching emptiness created by the missing engineering section, Imperial Fists Space Marines were assuming cover at the cranked doors and airlocks on each of the decks that had formerly led to the demolished section. Sparks showered Stentonox as another stream of disciplined fire impacted about him.

Stentonox shook his head. Demetrius Katafalque was a cold bastard. Even now, diplomatic protocols between the Legiones Astartes and the Emperor's Custodians should be maintained. Stentonox, the sergeant-at-arms and the rescued foot knight were all easy targets, clinging to the shattered walls – no challenge at all for the lethal aim of the Imperial Fists. Return fire from Custodian guardian spears hammered back at the sons of Dorn, mauling their blasted cover.

'Kill classifications are still in force,' Stentonox ordered across the vox. At the opposite end of the ruined section, foot knights with their shields provided cover for Custodian marksmen in the gaping passages and demolished decking.

‘*But captain–*’ Sergeant Memnon began.

‘Battle proprieties, sergeant,’ Stentonox returned. ‘Those are my orders. Suppression fire only.’

‘*We can work our way around the section*.’

‘Negative. Hold position.’ For all the Custodians knew, the Imperial Fists could have wired the entire quarter to blow and drop out of the bottom of the orbital plate. ‘Sergeant Doloran, Custodian Vega – with me.’

Stentonox made a powered jump from the shattered ledge, across the howling open space and through the gunfire, down onto what was left of the lower deck and the sergeant-at-arms. He was swiftly followed by Vega, and the three of them edged their way along the jagged perimeter, swinging from several mauled struts before putting their boots down on solid decking. Above them the fire fight raged, bolter fire streaming back and forth across the open space, drumming into the ruined architecture.

Suddenly, the lights on the airlock in front of them began to flash, and the Custodians pulled back into the section wreckage. The bulkhead cleared its seals, and a combat squad of Imperial Fists filed through, the bright yellow of their plate almost in itself a challenge. They took up position on the shattered deck, ready to offer more suppression fire and seemingly oblivious to the intruders in their midst.

Erupting from the twisted metal and sparking machinery, Vega surprised the Space Marines; he deflected a couple of bolt-rounds with his shield before slamming the two nearest warriors back into the wall, sending the barrels of their weapons wide.

Another Fist turned to find the sergeant-at-arms already at his side. A gilded fist smashed the Space Marine’s faceplate, sending him back towards the lock. Tearing the ruined helm free, the Imperial Fist brought up his bolter, but Doloran already had his gauntlets on the weapon’s casing, leaning in with the full weight of his Terminator armour. The sergeant smashed back with an elbow, slamming his opponent’s skull off the compartment wall.

Of the two remaining squad members, the closest turned to find Stentonox standing behind him. The shield-captain’s face betrayed a cold fury. A wild bolt-round sang off the sculpted gold of his pauldron, but Stentonox kicked out and knocked the Space Marine from the edge of the shattered deck and into the yawning drop beyond it.

Charging him back into a warrior that had wrestled himself free from behind Vega’s shield, Stentonox grappled the last Space Marine, and rained a storm of heavy blows down upon them both. He heard servos creak and war-plate fracture beneath his relentless punches.

‘*Ready?*’ the shield-captain roared at Vega, who still had one struggling Space Marine and his bolter jammed up against the wall.

‘Yes, sir!’ The foot knight angled the shield and ran it along the wall like a dozer blade, ploughing all three Imperial Fists from their footing and over the edge into the howling sky. As they fell, Stenonox heard the futility of bolt-rounds fired back up at the under-plate.

The shield captain turned. Doloran was standing with the unconscious body of his opponent hanging limply by one arm. Stentonox nodded, and the sergeant-at-arms launched the Imperial Fist after his flailing brothers.

‘*Shield-captain*,’ chirped the vox. It was one of the grav-transports.

‘Report.’

‘*We cannot reach the Custodians on the engine column, or hold station beneath it. The inverse gravitic interference is too strong.*’

‘Damn,’ Stentonox murmured. It had been a long shot. Mid-air interception would be impossible without sending the transports into a similar freefall. As the shield-captain peered over the ragged edge, down at the Imperial Fists now also smashing through the merciless nest of vanes and aerials, his only comfort

was that Katafalque's men would share the same fate as his.

As a second squad of Imperial Fists streamed from the airlock, weapons raised and demanding their surrender, both Vega and the sergeant-at-arms moved to counter them. Something had been unleashed in the pair – even without their sweeping blades and bolters, they were ready for battle. They were ready to pound Space Marines into the deck with their bare hands.

'No,' Stentonox said. 'Stand down.'

The order was quiet, but confident, and it was obeyed. As the Imperial Fists surrounded the Custodians, shouting commands and jabbing weapon muzzles at them, the vox crackled again.

'*What are your orders, shield-captain?*'

'Stand by,' Stentonox voxed back, as he raised his gauntlets in submission, with Vega and Doloran following suit. 'The game's not over. I've just introduced some new pieces to the board.'

With little ceremony, diplomacy or respect, the three Custodians had their gauntlets bound and were bundled through the doors of a nearby freight elevator.

As it rose rapidly through the crowded floors of the orbital plate, Stentonox felt the pull of ascension in the pit of his stomach. As the seconds ebbed away, he thought of his Custodians clawing and tumbling their way down the outside of the colossal gravitic column; he knew that they would keep their heads, removing their armour plate and using their cloaks and cardinals to create drag and tangle amongst the architecture.

He also knew, however, there was no way back up to the under-plate, and that it was only a matter of time before they ran out of handholds. In tossing the Imperial Fists overboard, the shield-captain had consigned them to the same fate.

The doors shuddered open, and the Space Marines sent them out onto the operations deck of the orbital plate with a rough shove. With boltguns in their backs, Stentonox, Vega and Doloran were marched between rows of consoles and servitor-manned rune banks to the centre of the large chamber. Blast screens rumbled aside to reveal the thin skies beyond and let in the brilliance of the Terran sun, casting mercantile menials, bridge staff and officials from the Danakil mining conglomerates in silhouette.

From out of the glare strode an Imperial Fists officer, his eyes grim, his jaw taut and his white hair cut into a tonsure crown. He was flanked by a pair of legionary champions, who held Stentonox and his men in the unswerving aim of their ornate boltguns.

'Katafalque–' Stentonox began, as the shield-captain was forced to his knees by his captors.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' Demetrius Katafalque demanded.

'Katafalque, listen to me–'

'No! Do you have any idea what you've done – in this, a time of war and betrayal?'

'Don't lecture me, *legionary*,' Stentonox spat back. 'You think just because you use the unforgiving earth of Terra as a weapon rather than your boltguns, that you have not murdered my warriors – the Emperor's own Custodians? What dark diplomacy is that, Fist?'

Katafalque sneered. 'You will pay for what you have done.'

'I did what I had to,' Stentonox seethed. 'What you forced me to do, and I'd do it again. We will both pay for your stubborn refusal to see sense. You have no authority to be here.'

'Rogal Dorn–'

'Rogal Dorn's word might be law anywhere else in the galaxy,' Stentonox told him, 'but here, in and above the Imperial Palace, we all answer to a higher authority.'

'The primarch seeks to secure the seat of that authority,' Katafalque stormed back.

'And in doing so, he imperils it.'

‘That is your opinion, but we have official authorisation.’

‘No, you do not,’ the shield-captain told him. ‘Though you undoubtedly will. The Warmason will have his indentured labour and the Palace will be further fortified... but not today, Demetrius. Not today. I understand your desires – I share them. But terrible mistakes have been made in the name of expediency, and it is my duty to protect the Emperor from the consequences of such mistakes.’

‘I will see my primarch’s orders through,’ Katafalque assured the shield-captain.

‘Just listen to me,’ Stentonox said, coming as close to imploring as his pride would allow. ‘My men – your men, too – are desperately clawing their way down the gravitic column. When they slip beyond the drives’ reach, they will fall to their deaths. We have no time for this. Give the order. Engage the gravitic anchor. Bring the orbital plate to a halt and in so doing, save our men.’

Katafalque stared at the shield-captain, his face contorting with hatred and disgust.

‘Engage the anchor, Demetrius, and they will be drawn safely down to ground level.’

‘I will not,’ Katafalque said finally. ‘I will not be hostage to the games, perverse logic and trickery of the Legio Custodes, with your infamous disguises and deceptions. Some say it is wisdom to play at being the enemy and learn from simulated conflict, but all I see is a force at war with itself.’

‘And I need not lecture the Legiones Astartes about that!’ Stentonox bit back his outrage. ‘This is Lord Dorn’s adamance, his obstinacy in you.’

‘A failing, perhaps,’ Katafalque admitted. ‘My men will die for it, as your men will die for yours. Ask yourself this, shield-captain – how much further will you compound this failure? Arcus *is* going to the Palace. Those are my primarch’s orders.’

Stentonox sighed. ‘Demetrius, for the sake of the Emperor’s blood that runs through your veins and those of your men about to die, *please*... Engage the anchor.’

Demetrius Katafalque leaned in towards the kneeling shield-captain. ‘No, Custodian,’ he whispered. ‘I will not.’

Stentonox allowed his head to fall. There was nothing more that he could do.

There was sudden commotion upon the operations deck. A report from a servitor was communicated urgently to an operations menial, who in turn passed it to the deck officer.

‘My lord,’ the man called out across the operations chamber to Katafalque. ‘The gravitic anchor has been engaged.’

Shock, followed by anger, clouded Katafalque’s snarling face. There was no exclamation. No confusion. No rage. He simply glared at Stentonox, his eyes alight with hatred and distrust.

‘I want confirmation,’ he said.

Lowering the barrel of his beautifully crafted boltgun and putting an armoured digit to the side of his helm, one of his champions sent the query. ‘Our brothers confirm it,’ he reported. ‘The anchor has initiated gravitic reversal.’

‘How long?’ Katafalque asked, without taking his eyes from the shield-captain.

‘Two hours, my lord,’ the deck officer informed him by way of an apology. ‘Two hours for the column to complete its cycle and for us then to disengage it again.’

Katafalque nodded slowly to himself. Stentonox looked up at him. The two observed a moment of grim silence. ‘Our brother Fists, and the Custodians?’

‘Caught in the gravity well,’ the deck officer confirmed. ‘Along with some debris and loose fixtures from the conurbatia below.’

‘This will not help you,’ Katafalque muttered to Stentonox.

The Custodian was lost in thought, however. His men could not have been responsible for such an action, but he wasn’t about to tell the captain that.

Alarms sounded across the operations deck.

'What is it now?' Katafalque demanded. His other champion strode across the deck and cut through the small throng of menials about the sensorium console.

'Gunships, inbound,' the Imperial Fist reported. 'Lunar designations. The Silent Sisterhood, captain. They're making an atmospheric approach.'

Katafalque's lips found their way back to a snarl. 'Get me a vox-link.'

'No need – we're receiving a hololithic transmission, my lord,' the deck officer announced.

'On projectors,' Katafalque commanded. 'We shall hear of our sisters' business in these great affairs.'

The spectral representation of a woman misted into a fixed signal before them. Stentonox saw immediately that it was Duesstra Edelstyne, Sister-Commandress of the Raptor Guard and Confidente-Tranquil to Lady Krole, who had first alerted the Master of the Watch to the threat of the orbital plate. The novice glossator stood at her ghostly mistress's side.

'*Captain Katafalque*,' she said, translating. '*Do you know to whom you speak?*'

'I do, my lady,' Katafalque replied. 'We have collaborated many times on the Palace fortifications. You have my utmost respect, sister-commandress, but do not think that will allow you to interfere in what are already crowded and unfortunate affairs.'

'*Listen to me, captain. I am going to prevent you from committing any further to this calamitous endeavour. Information has recently come to my attention regarding the indentured workforce on board Arcus. Records show that the Danakil mineral conglomerates assured you that each and every one of their workers had met the demands of security. Isometrics, gene-profiling and so forth*.'

'This is correct.'

'*I'm afraid to inform you, captain*,' the glossator continued to translate, '*that the Palace has been put on high alert. It is currently at situation-Xanthus and will remain so while the orbital plate remains on station or approach. Situation-Xanthus requires a higher level of Palace clearance than conglomerate isometrics – Danakil's profiling does not extend to psionic screening and associated genetic mutations. It is the Sisterhood's suspicion that your labour population might harbour witchbreeds and unsantioned psyker-strains*.'

Demetrius Katafalque turned his stabbing glare from the hololith to Stentonox. Edelstyne produced a scroll document and held it up.

'*Under section six-fourteen of the Vondraburg Proclamation, I am authorised to impound Arcus and its indentured workforce for processing and interrogation at the Scholastica Psykana facility atop Hive Illium*.'

'You're serious?' Katafalque said, looking from Stentonox to Edelstyne and then back again.

'*Always, captain*,' the glossator assured him. '*These are serious matters. So serious, in fact, that the Somnus Citadel has sent word to Rogal Dorn. He is yet to reply, but he will. He will want to avoid the embarrassment of his Legion smuggling dangerous, unsanctioned psykers through the security measures – including his* own *security measures – and into the Imperial Palace. What do you think, Captain Katafalque?*'

Moments passed. The captain said nothing, then finally nodded. 'Yes. Lord Dorn would want to avoid such complications. It was fortunate that you took such an interest in our little misunderstanding.'

'*Many organisations pride themselves on being the right hand of the Emperor, captain. They cannot all be so. Sometimes, it's difficult for one hand to know what the other is doing*.'

'Quite,' Katafalque said through gritted teeth. 'The Imperial Fists shall stand sentinel over the indentured population and see Arcus safely to your facility at Illium.'

'*We shall take dual-custodianship of the orbital plate, captain*,' Edelstyne had her glossator inform

him. '*Please clear your hangers for the Raptor Guard's gunships and transports. Edelstyne out.*'

Both the commandress and her novice dissipated into a static haze. The operations deck was silent.

'Release them,' Katafalque ordered. 'Order the other squads to stand down.'

As the Imperial Fists released their binders, Stentonox and his Custodians got to their feet. 'Likewise,' Stentonox told his sergeant-at-arms. 'Vega – make your way down to the engineering and maintenance decks. You will lead the effort to rescue our men from the column. Inform Captain-General Valdor that we will be returning with the transports.' He fixed Katafalque with a raw glare. 'The action has been prosecuted, and has reached a satisfactory conclusion for both contingents. Tell him... Tell him there are no significant casualties to report on either side.'

As the shield-captain turned to leave, Katafalque grabbed him by the arm. Stentonox tensed.

'I want you to know,' Katafalque told him, 'that regardless of your officious truths or her convenient lies, it is *you* that has acted inappropriately here today. The Legio Custodes, the Silent Sisterhood – you put yourselves between the Emperor and his enemies. I guarantee that a day will come when you're going to wish that the wall between the Emperor and his enemies is taller and thicker than it is. When that day comes, you will understand how pointless, and indeed reckless, this has all been.'

Without looking at Katafalque, Stentonox pulled away and made for the elevator, leaving Arcus to the Imperial Fists.

It was late. Braziers of incense glowed about the vaulted corridors and halls of the Imperial Palace. Ordinarily, the Master of the Watch would debrief the sentinel-securitas, so that the captain of the next shift could be presented with details of importance and continuity. Since the Palace was still at situation-Xanthus, Enobar Stentonox found himself debriefing the Chief Custodian himself.

They walked the arcades of the Second Ward as they talked, the alarm-status also necessitating double the Ares Guard for the Captain-General and a foot knight sentry to escort the Master of the Watch on his duties, as protocol dictated. The Custodians approached the concentrica-barbican, signalling their passage from the outer to the inner regions of the Palace.

It had been a long day for both of them. Beyond the incident on the orbital plate, Stentonox had spent the rest of his watch attempting to catch up with the schedule. He had failed miserably. He would be passing a colossal list of unfinished business on to the next Master of the Watch, just as his predecessor had done to him.

Constantin Valdor had left the blockade lines before Arcus to embark upon a full Palace inspection, taking the opportunity to review the minutiae of the Emperor's security under a genuine Xanthus-alert situation. This had led into an emergency session of the Caucum Aegis: a strategic assembly of Custodian veterans that advised the Captain-General on matters of security. The arrival of the orbital plate – and the diplomatic nightmare that had ensued – required greater review. It had been unexpected, and therefore manifested as ten times the perceived threat.

It was exactly the kind of danger that the Blood Games could not prepare them for. The future validity of the Games themselves had even come into question.

From the Caucum Aegis, the Chief Custodian had gone into a meeting with the Sigillite himself, which had left him dark and introspective.

'So the orbital plate has cleared Palace airspace,' Valdor confirmed.

'Yes, sir,' Stentonox said. 'On its way to Illium, Emperor willing, with Captain Katafalque still on board.'

'He's a stubborn, humourless bastard,' Valdor sighed. 'Not unlike Dorn himself. That said, there's no one from the Legiones Astartes I'd rather have manning our walls.'

Stentonox found himself forced to agree.

The shield-captain found himself lost in thought. The action on Arcus was behind him, but Stentonox had found it difficult to relax. It wasn't just that the Palace was still at high alert; something had been gnawing away at the back of his mind, the niggling feeling that he had missed something important. Something he didn't want to leave unattended for the next Master of the Watch to deal with...

He let his eyes drift from Constantin Valdor and across the glorious, golden plate of his Ares Guard. He looked up at the Terminators on the concentrica security gate, and at the sentry assigned to him as Master of the Watch. His gaze fell to the Custodian's rank and testimonials. *Lentum Foot Knight*, *Vega Eritreus Sengral Obispum*.

'Shield-captain?' said Valdor.

Vega.

There was something about the way the foot knight carried himself – about the way he strode, tall and proud, with his guardian spear held before him.

'Shield-captain,' Valdor pressed. 'Is there anything else?'

'Just one piece of outstanding business, sir,' Stentonox replied.

The shield-captain spun upon his armoured heel. He went for the foot knight escorting him down the arcade, but the Custodian's halberd was between them in a flash. Stentonox grabbed the haft and the pair wrestled for control of the weapon, prompting the Chief Custodian's Ares Guard to surround their master in a protective formation.

Stentonox got a thumb over the ejection stud on the boltgun attachment's breach, and the heavy magazine clattered to the ground as he and the foot knight circled, pushing each other back and forth across the arcade. Vega heaved the guardian spear forwards with a powerful shove, smashing Stentonox in the face.

As the shield-captain fell back against the wall, the Ares Guard levelled their own weapons at the foot knight. 'Hold your fire,' Stentonox managed, but Vega came at them, throwing the halberd like a javelin. The shield-captain went to grab the unarmed foot knight but found himself snatched around with lightning speed.

Vega used the shield-captain as a pivot to turn and propel Stentonox straight into the Ares Guard formation. The foot knight followed him, snatching a short sword from the scabbard of one of the veteran Custodians. The blade's owner paid for its loss – Vega rammed it into the warrior's back, then whipped it back to parry the spear thrusts of the others.

Stentonox came up between the foot knight and the nearest Ares Guard. He grabbed Vega's sword arm, burying his shoulder in the foot knight's armoured chest. Smashing down with his elbow, Stentonox knocked the weapon out of his opponent's grip. As the blade clattered to the stone floor, the shield-captain turned to restrain him but was greeted with an armoured headbutt to the face.

Dodging the sweeping blade of a guardian spear, the foot knight snatched at the weapon, turning it in its owner's grasp and disarming the Custodian. Heaving the warrior back into the opposite wall with a crack of golden battleplate, Vega found himself face to face with his true target: Constantin Valdor.

The Captain-General of the Legio Custodes had not been watching the unfolding chaos like some casual observer, waiting for his Custodians to defend him. He was primed. He was ready. His attacker's moves had been blinding, his assault confident, but Vega had barely recovered his balance when the great fist of the Chief Custodian took him squarely in the faceplate.

The foot knight was propelled backwards by the sheer force of the blow. He tumbled back, his knees flying over his shoulders, and landing some distance up the passageway on his face and breastplate. Pushing himself to his knees, he shook the skull-rattling force of the impact from his helmet.

Sentries came from the concentrica gate, levelling the long barrels of their incinerators at the foot knight,

and the Ares Guard surrounded the Chief Custodian once more. Stentonox stood beside the injured, wiping blood from his broken nose.

'Enough,' the shield-captain told Vega, 'or I clear them to fire.'

The foot knight got shakily to his feet, looking back at the Terminators behind him and the concentrica gate to the inner Palace, then back to Stentonox and the Chief Custodian. He went limp, and nodded his surrender.

'Report to the infirmary,' Stentonox told the wounded Ares Guard, sending them on their way.

'Captain Stentonox?' Valdor put to the captain.

The shield-captain turned and presented himself. Similarly, Vega stood to attention.

'Captain-General, may I present Custodian Belisarius,' Stentonox said. 'The final participant in the present cycle of the Blood Games.'

Constantin Valdor's tired face broke into a grim smile of appreciation. The foot knight took off his ruined high helm, revealing the fresh face of a young and ambitious Custodian.

'Impressive.'

'That's not the half of it, sir,' Stentonox said. 'I have deduced that Custodian Belisarius was also on board the orbital plate today – he had been hoping to gain access to the Palace as one of the indentured workforce.'

Stentonox looked to the young Custodian, who nodded slowly.

Valdor nodded as well. 'I'll wager he would have succeeded.'

'Perhaps,' the shield-captain replied. 'Instead, he found his talents turned to... diplomatic sabotage, engaging the gravitic anchor from the orbital plate's drive column, and thereby saving the lives of both Legio Custodes and Legiones Astartes. He also covertly alerted the Silent Sisterhood to our stalemate, thereby saving everyone else.'

'You knew this at the time?' Valdor asked.

'No, sir – unfortunately I did not,' Stentonox admitted. 'Custodian Belisarius did not wish to compromise his performance in the games. Regrettably, I came to the realisation only a few moments ago. Belisarius must have left the plate disguised as one of our own, Custodian Vega. He intended to infiltrate the Palace defences as... well, as one of the Legio Custodes, sir. I fear he pushed his luck when he assigned himself as my sentry in the hope of achieving access to the inner Palace.' Stentonox ran the forefinger and thumb of one gauntlet down his now crooked nose. 'It almost smacks of hubris.'

'And it *almost* worked,' Valdor concluded.

'Indeed, sir,' the shield-captain said. 'It seems to me that Custodian Belisarius was trying to make a point. As part of his infiltration, he clearly made you a target – I think that it would be wise to learn something from this. As principal among the Emperor's protectors and the head of the Palace's security, you are a target for our enemies.'

'We all are,' Valdor said. 'All those who stand between Horus and the Emperor.'

'Sir.'

The Chief Custodian looked at them both for a long moment. 'We'll talk more of this, though. We'll talk about what else can be done.'

It had been a long day. Stentonox had carried the duty of Palace security for only twenty-four hours, and yet he felt completely drained. Exhausted, even. He found it difficult to imagine the strength it might take to carry such a burden with every day that dawned.

Pushing through his Ares Guard and walking up towards the concentrica gate, Constantin Valdor turned back to the battered Stentonox and Belisarius. 'Know this – I sleep better knowing that there are Custodians like you within our ranks. For now, let us enjoy some well-earned rest. When the enemy is at

our gates, there will be little time for such luxuries.’

Constantin Valdor and Enobar Stentonox review the matters of the day

THE PHOENICIAN

Nick Kyme

I am dying.

A flickering retinal display tells me that my cybernetics are functioning, but I cannot move them. Without flesh to impel it, the iron means nothing. Without an engine to drive it, what use is the machine? For all its ostensible fortitude and resilience, I now discover that iron is just as weak as flesh. It is ironic that only now does this revelation strike me.

Julius is walking away from me, the arrogant cur. It takes me a moment to realise why he is upside down and I see his armoured heels disappearing into the distance. My Tactical Dreadnought armour has failed. I'm on my back, trying to hold in my guts.

I am not alone.

The dead are everywhere, their ranks swelling with each passing second. Morlocks in funerary black surround me. I see snatches of iconography, a splash of blood. Their wounds are fresh, but the legacy of them, and the wounds against this Legion, will linger long after this battle has ended. I will not see its end, though. I feel no regret or sadness – anger fills me instead, a black well of hatred that I am slowly slipping into.

My head lolls to the side, and I see a face I recognise. I rasp a name.

'*Desaan*...'

He doesn't answer. My brother is already gone.

I try to suppress the sense of fatalism that seizes my mind, just as the chill of death begins to seize my body.

I want to believe that this can all end in victory, that we weren't simply undone by a lie.

Then I see him, emerging through a cloud of smoke, shimmering in the heat haze from a thousand fires, and the one whom he faces. Death is close, its hands around my throat, digging through my innards with eager talons. Slit from abdomen to neck, the pain rivals anything I have ever felt before... But I must hang on. I *have* to see this.

Blackness crouches at the edge of my vision. I am content to let it, just as long as I can remain conscious.

Two brothers face one another amidst an ocean of war, the dead lapping at their feet.

One is stern – his eyes like pools of mercury, hair cut close to the scalp. Cold and unyielding, his face is as craggy and hard as a Medusan cliff. Black as coal, with arms of pearlescent silver, he is brawn personified with a fresh-forged vengeance.

Ferrus Manus, the Gorgon. My father.

The other is slender, even in his purple and gold armour. His unhelmed visage is handsome, the epitome of physical perfection, and long white hair streaks from his head like flashes of fire. He has my father's weapon, the great hammer *Forgebreaker*. As he climbs to a spur of rock, this vainglorious yet deadly peacock, his movements are swaggering and arrogant.

Fulgrim, the Phoenician. My father's brother.

Ferrus Manus will kill him for this affront. As he strides towards the spur with purpose, the living making way for this clash while the dead linger underfoot, he draws *Fireblade*. It burns like his anger, righteously.

Fulgrim's smile remains. His arms are open as if to embrace the Gorgon. In truth, it is a mocking challenge. Below, my few surviving brothers of the Avernii Clan clash with the Phoenix Guard. Lightning claw meets halberd, and the death toll amongst the Morlocks and the Emperor's Children rises.

I black out for a few seconds. My eyes are bloody and I witness the rest of the battle through a crimson filter that my retinal lenses cannot correct.

Forgebreaker looks heavy; too noble a weapon for Fulgrim's ignoble hands, but he wields it deftly and I am reminded of his awesome prowess.

My father speaks words of accusation, but my hearing is fading and I fail to catch them. His teeth are bared in a predatory snarl. Fulgrim's too, revealed in a liar's grin.

From despair comes fury. Ferrus Manus charges the spur, his brother upon it.

My father is a brawler, brute strength and undeniable power, but Fulgrim's technique is choreographed like a dancer's. Even with *Forgebreaker*, he is swift and precise. He rains blows against my father's defence, smashes him down time and again. Ferrus Manus will not be bowed. Anger fuels him, and Fulgrim feels the heat of it. His smile wavers, turning to an uncertain frown.

I am weakening; my body is shutting down. My mind clings on by the thinnest skein. I have to see this. I need to know...

They circle, two demi-gods surrounded by the last of my dying kin. My father's pauldron is dented by a glancing blow. The return is quick and two-handed, and leaves a fiery split in the Phoenician's war-plate. The Gorgon recoils, the haft of *Forgebreaker* smashed into his pugilist's nose. He replies with a downward slash that Fulgrim dodges; a second cut clips the primarch's cheek and he snarls. He thrusts out with the hammer, a jab that punches the air from my father's lungs and leaves him gasping. A desperate cross-cut keeps Fulgrim at arm's length as the Phoenician leaps back to avoid *Fireblade*'s sting. One-handed, Fulgrim loops the stolen hammer around for a murderous blow, but Ferrus Manus blocks it. Sparks cascade, lightning crackling from both weapons.

I hear thunder, and imagine the very earth trembling against the fury of this duel.

For a moment they are locked, brother versus brother, *Fireblade* grinding against *Forgebreaker*'s haft.

With a roar, Ferrus Manus throws Fulgrim off, but the Phoenician is quick to recover. He spins away from the thrust aimed at his chest and lands a punch against the Gorgon's exposed jaw. He shrugs it off and draws a cut down Fulgrim's flank. Hard to tell for certain – my vision is starting to blur and the pain has ebbed to a dull ache that will soon become an endless cold – but I swear that the Phoenician exhaled in pleasure at that last wound.

Truly, he is depraved.

Mocking laughter erupts from Fulgrim, his arrogance boundless even in the face of incandescent hatred. Savagely, my father lashes out and rips the shoulder guard from Fulgrim's otherwise pristine armour. If I could make a fist in triumph, I would. With gathering momentum, the Gorgon turns inside the Phoenician's guard and makes to thrust with *Fireblade*.

My eyes widen in anticipation of victory...

But Fulgrim counters, faster than any warrior has a right to, and turns the blow aside before crafting one of his own that strikes my father's skull.

Anguish rises with the blood in my gorge, but I dare not look away. I could not even if I wanted to.

Ferrus Manus is staggered, bowed on one knee but resolute. Blood is streaming from his head, drenching him in a red shroud. Gritting his teeth, he finds a gap in the Phoenician's otherwise flawless guard and

cuts deep across his torso.

Fulgrim falls back, *Forgebreaker* no longer in his grasp as he clutches at his body. On their knees, they stare at one another, but I am struck by the Phoenician's apparent melancholy. I suspect lucidity has already fled, for I look upon Fulgrim and see true sadness. It is usurped by acceptance as Ferrus Manus rises to his feet.

Fireblade hangs aloft like a frozen comet, burning.

I am about to commit myself to duty's end. Death has stayed its hand and I am thankful for it.

But the fatal blow does not fall. I blink and wonder if I have missed some crucial moment.

A silver blade flashes in Fulgrim's grip. It halts *Fireblade* mid-swing, but the burning sword is descending all the same.

A harsh flash of light hurts my eyes, but I no longer have the strength to look away. An aura, dark and eldritch, has enveloped both primarchs – I see Fulgrim on his feet and my father back on his knees, his armour parted as though it were parchment.

I want to cry out, to rage at the wrongness of it. Fate has been thwarted. As I near death, I see it, I see the thing inside the Phoenician. It is writhing and serpentine, yet the flesh-host around it is staggering, bereft of his usual finesse.

Fulgrim's eyes widen, and as they meet my own, I see his terror. I see the desperate urgency in him that screams not to kill his brother.

The blow falls. I cannot stop it. Iron skin shears apart, cleaved by amethyst fire.

I detect the reek of something spoiled, rotten meat and old flesh. Rolling over the slopes, surging from some unseen place come katabatic winds. They wash over me, over the dead, and I hear voices trapped within them.

They are screaming.

There are voices within the screams, beckoning me on. They come from the Land of Shadows, from Medusa, where the revenants of old, long forgotten lives still walk. They come for me, the slain warriors of the Clan Avernii, reaching out to take me with them, to grant me peace.

I recoil as their faces change, as noble Medusan sons devolve into wraithly phantoms. Fingers wither into talons, eyes shrink into orbless sockets. They seek to drag me into the darkness, and I have just enough will left to deny them their soul-feast.

Upon the Isstvan plain, a chilling tempest rages, with my dead father and his killers at the heart of it. I see the essence of life leaving the Gorgon through his severed neck. His head lies separate from it, glassy-eyed and etched with rage.

As the wind dies, I feel my torment just beginning.

Fulgrim stoops, although it isn't the Phoenician. With one hand, he seizes my father's cropped hair and presents the bloody head to me.

I do not see a primarch – I behold a monster. My closeness to death has gifted me that truth.

And in that moment, as my heart beats its last and a final breath saws painfully through my lungs, I realise what faces us. I can see it clearly. I see that we–

SERMON OF EXODUS

David Annandale

There are voices and words in the echoes. Some of the words are spoken by the voices, but not all. There are words born from no tongue. They are heavy with dark meaning, sharp with truth and coiling with toxins. And there are voices that say nothing, yet howl the void of madness. So many echoes shatter against each other, slithering down the slopes and bouncing off rocks with predator leaps. They do not travel on the wind. They *are* the wind.

And some of them have come for him.

Tsi Rekh stands on a bluff. He has left his acolytes at the camp. Before him is the plain. It is a vast expanse of dry, cracked mud. It looks like the flaking carcass of Davin itself. In the centre, half a day's march away, a single conical peak rises – the Mount of the Lodge. Its silhouette darkens with the falling night. It becomes a shadow, one that reaches out to him with its absence and echoes.

The echoes are everywhere on Davin. It takes skill and faith and sacrifice to hear them, to draw their scattered force into knots of prophecy and revelation. They touch even those who cannot hear. The truths of the gods are not limited by distance. To parse the truths, though – to sift through and truly understand them – that is a gift. It is the province of the few. And the closer one comes to the source of their propagation, the greater the density of the echoes.

Is it clarity that Tsi Rekh hopes to find? Revelation, certainly, but that is not the same as clarity. Revelation can strip the flesh from the soul. Mysteries can step out from the night. They can descend from on high with fury. To witness them is to be laid bare before something far more terrible and powerful than simple clarity.

He is so close now, so very close. So close to the *source*. So close to the Lodge of Echoes.

Close enough that the voices are so numerous, they must weave and tangle and entwine. Fragments and laughter, secrets and cries, the screams of torn vision and worse truths are gathered together. From their midst, they select a single thread for Tsi Rekh alone. It is gossamer venom. It will not speak its revelation, but this echo will speak *to* him. He closes his eyes. He opens himself to its touch.

He does not presume to take the thread. He lets it circle around his skull. Thin beyond vision, coiling, sharp as darkness, it reaches into his ears.

This is *his* echo. This is *his* truth.

A mouth that he must never gaze upon begins his word. A single sound.

Mmmmmmmmm…

That is the gift. That is the echo that has come for him.

Mmmmmmmm…

Beneath sound, beneath bone, as great as a continent's stone.

Mmmmmmmm…

The promise of more, if he proves worthy, if he passes the test.

And he will. This is his vow. He will hear the full expression of the echo that is his destiny.

Mmmmmmmmmmmm…

…Memory.

His tent, the flaps parting to admit Akshub. She is alone, this high priestess of the Serpent Lodge. The old woman is half Tsi Rekh's size and many times his age. Thin. Bones in her hair, older bones beneath her flesh. Age is everywhere upon her. His tribe, stronger in weapons and armour and body than the vermin who live in her camp, could slaughter all her kin. He could kill Akshub with a single blow.

The half-formed thought is terrifying. Why? Because he would be dead as soon as he raised his hand. Because he would anger the gods.

Banishing the idea before it takes hold. Listening to Akshub open the doorway to destiny.

'On this day, the Lodge of the Hound has the favour of the gods,' she says. 'To the Serpent Lodge fell the honour of turning the Warmaster. His change is the work of my lodge. It is our serpent that whispers in his heart. He walks from us to bring the fire to the stars.' She grins. Insects crawl over her teeth. 'But you, priest, have a great claim too. You will hear the sacred from the source. You will touch it. You will *be* it. It is time to proclaim your right.'

'My right to what?'

He knows. He understands the meaning of the word *source*. He must hear her say it, though. Akshub's voice will make it law.

'The Lodge of Echoes.'

Sighing. Glory, a burning coal in his chest. 'We have tried before.' As have all the lodges.

Older memories, transmitted memories, the lore of Davin: the Lodge of the Serpent, of the Bear, of the Hound, of the Hawk, of the Crow, all – all, *all* – have sought to own the Lodge of Echoes, the first lodge, the lodge that precedes and surpasses all animals.

All – all, *all* – have failed.

Has any worshipper ever even crossed the plain? No answer. Not one has returned. The mountain, always a distant and forbidden marker of power.

But Akshub's voice comes, cracked and insistent. 'Go, priest. Cross the plain. Climb the mountain. Open the doors.'

'The gods will permit it?'

'The gods *command* it. Go and meet destiny.' She stretches out a hand and jabs a hooked fingernail against Tsi Rekh's chest. 'Open the doors,' she says again.

'And why does the Serpent give this honour to the Hound?'

Insects and smiles. 'I give nothing. I am the messenger. I am the opener of ways, but it is not for me to travel them.'

And Tsi Rekh to the dark mountain has come.

He opens his eyes. The memory burns off like mist before the magnificence of the present. The shadow of the mountain has almost reached the bluff. The details of the plain have vanished. There is only the dark. The loam of whispers.

The last of the light is fading, its lie stabbed to death. This is how it has always been on Davin. There is no rebirth at dawn – there is only the primal sacrifice of nightfall. With every sunset, the gods reassert their rule with sacred murder. The shadow draws closer yet, then closer: a shadow with mass, strength and will. It reaches the base of the bluff. Minute by minute, it climbs higher. The tide of dark reaches for Tsi Rekh. He watches. He will not blaspheme by looking away. He will see the very second that marks his fall toward apotheosis.

The shadow reaches him. It touches him.

It is more than cold. It is a freezing agony, as though his limbs were being severed one by one. He welcomes the shadow and its will. And so much more than cold, more than pain. This is a test.

Then, through the act of his welcome, it becomes a claim. It is ownership. It is a grasping. In the echoes, he hears nods. He has been found worthy.

'Now!' he cries.

'Now!' he calls.

'*Now!*' he thunders.

His voice is picked up by the echoes. It too has been welcomed by them. They carry it before him, across the plain, bringing his ferocious joy of worship to the mountain. They carry it also behind him, to his followers, and beyond. Because he is blessed, because he is chosen by the Lodge of Echoes, his voice has joined the dark chorus that rings the planet. On the other side of the globe, sorcerers of the lesser lodges will hear his voice amidst the fragments that come to them, and they will wonder at the summons.

Does he feel power now?

Yes. *Yes*.

Wait, say the echoes.

More, say the echoes.

Mmmmmmmmm… says his fate, growing louder, stronger, on the verge of transformation.

He waits, motionless, arms outstretched, staring into the rich darkness. His followers arrive from the camp. They number thirty-one. With him, their party is thirty-two, a sacred grouping: the eightfold path of Chaos multiplied by the will of the four gods. They are rabble and they are faithful, sacrifices to be used without thought and martyrs to be praised for their willingness to die. Like him, they bear weapons and armour. They are powerful amongst their fellows. They come from the Lodge of the Hound and that is enough, whether they are alive or dead, to make them supreme over all other Davinites.

Tsi Rekh walks into the shadow. They follow. They descend the slope. The ground of the plains is uneven, jagged. Some of the pilgrims are barefoot, and before they have gone many steps they leave a trail of blood behind them. They do not light torches. They march into the very *origin* of night. They cannot see where they walk. Tsi Rekh strides with certainty, guided by the pull of destiny. The others do not have an echo of their own to sustain them. They stagger. They trip. They fall. They do not cry out but Tsi Rekh knows that there is pain and the ruin of flesh. Beneath his feet, he can feel the squirm and crunch of insects. They scrabble out from the cracks. They are thirsty for the wounds of the faithful.

All is as it should be. His chest swells. He could swim through the dark to the mountain. But he will walk with his acolytes and bring them to whatever role it is that awaits them. They are elevated, because the Lodge of the Hound has been, but they are not chosen.

Unlike him.

Always chosen.

The wait of years.

A stirring in the depths of his mind. Thin as hair, jointed, with a scorpion's sting. What is it? He cannot grasp it. It grows stronger, more insistent as they walk through the night. In the hour before dawn, when at last they reach the foot of the mountain and begin to climb, the thing blossoms. The moment he touches the sacred rock, the coiled irritant strikes.

Memory again. Different. Older yet new. The event forgotten, erased from his consciousness. Born-reborn-exulting only now, answering a moment in time.

Tsi Rekh is a child. He is very young, a few years old. Can he speak yet? Barely. Can he understand? Yes. That is important.

Inside a tent. Whose? He can't tell, because that is *not* important. Akshub is there, the witch seeming old even then.

She has always been old.

Two other adults are there. His parents, speaking with Akshub. Why her and not an elder of their own lodge? Her presence is its own answer. She is that powerful, often transcending the lines between lodges.

His parents' attention goes back and forth between the witch and their son. He stands in the centre of the tent. Circles drawn in salt surround him. There are designs between the circles. The child does not know what they mean but they frighten him. The adult Tsi Rekh tries to read them in this new-old memory. They defy him. They keep shifting. They twist, they slither. They are serpents, and they are language. They are envenomed meaning.

'Hail,' Akshub is saying. 'You are blessed among our people. You have found favour with the gods.' She looks at Tsi Rekh. 'He will be the passage. He will be the way.'

His parents laugh with pride. Their pride sounds like the squealing of rats.

'Stand over him,' Akshub instructs.

They take their places inside the circles. Facing each other with Tsi Rekh in between. He looks up at these giants, his mother and father. This is the first time the adult priest sees their faces. Two more of the faithful, bearing the scars and damage of worship.

Strangers. They mean nothing.

Yet they mean everything, because they are the instruments necessary to achieve his glory.

Looking down at him, still laughing.

Still squealing.

Akshub's movements are a blur – graceful in their perfect brutality. His parents still stand but their throats are slashed wide by the old woman's knife. Blood falls in torrents onto his upturned face. A cataract, a flood, a rising sea. He is drowning. There is no tent, no ground, no air, only the blood.

The blood and the circles.

And the old woman's voice. 'Listen,' she hisses. '*Lisssssssten!*'

The drowning child obeys. The echo speaks to him for the first time then. Into his ears comes a whisper. It is a name. The memory loses definition there. He cannot be told the name yet. But now he knows the nature of the revelation, and the name with the great hum.

Mmmmmmmmmmmm…

And then.

Now. Outside the memory. Climbing the mountain. The echo, the word, the name, so vast and terrible that minds cannot hold it, begins to take shape. After the hum that is the thunder of earth comes the choir of dead stars.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaa…

'Light the torches,' Tsi Rekh says.

It is done, and the torches are strapped to leather harnesses on the acolytes' backs, to burn high above their heads. The worshippers can climb with both hands. So there is light now. Smoke, too, and a stench. The heads of the torches are wrapped in cloth dipped in human tallow.

As the climb beings, Ske Vris, the most promising of Tsi Rekh's acolytes, stops, her hands frozen where they first touch the mountain.

'I cannot,' she says. She struggles, but a greater will holds her. 'I am forbidden.'

Tsi Rekh nods and leaves her. It occurs to him that she is being spared. Sacrifice, then, is ahead. He has no fear that it will be his – the end of his path is still as distant as it is grand.

So he leads the climb up the steep face. There are many handholds. There are also many shadows. They

cannot always be distinguished from one another. The mountain's jaggedness exacts its tribute of pain. With every injury, the victims scream their gratitude to the gods. That there would be a price was a given. It would be blasphemous to wish things otherwise. Victory without sacrifice is meaningless.

The closer they come to the peak, the greater the agony. The handholds are the edges of blades. Blood is the key to elevation, and Tsi Rekh is bleeding too. Hands, arms, legs, all robed in crimson. He feels the honour of the pain. It spurs him to greater speed, to hurry to his appointment.

Almost at the end of the climb now. There is a wide ledge coming up and perhaps a route into the complexity of the peak, which appears to twist like a nautilus shell.

Beschak climbs to Tsi Rekh's right, one respectful handhold behind. He has been Tsi Rekh's chief acolyte for years. Akshub presented him to Tsi Rekh when the follower was a child.

'The boy is important to you,' she had said. 'Prepare him. Make him ready for the moment.'

'How will I know when it comes?' Tsi Rekh asked.

'He will know.'

Beschak grabs a spur of rock with his left hand. He hauls himself up. His feet lose their purchase. He slips. Clutches the spur hard. A blood-slicked palm slips.

Tsi Rekh stops to watch.

Beschak's eyes shine in the light of his torch. He looks at Tsi Rekh. 'Now?' he asks.

Tsi Rekh says nothing. He waits to see.

The spur crumbles to dust, as if it had been nothing more than crusted sand. Beschak laughs and falls.

In Tsi Rekh's ear, in his mind, in his soul, he hears the echo's ecstatic ***Aaaaaaaaaaa…***

And new echoes. Granted to him alone? He would think so. Ancient ones, so forgotten that they can no longer reach much beyond the mountain's peak. Given strength at the moment of Beschak's shattering.

Tsi Rekh pauses. These echoes are startling. He did not expect this.

Images. They must be of another place. This cannot be Davin.

No, no, there is certainty. This is Davin. Of another time, buried beneath millennia of savagery and blood.

Images of cities, of soaring structures, of proud light.

Tsi Rekh's lips curl in hatred. He wants those towers brought low. So does someone else, the being to whom these memories and this hatred belong.

The echoes fade. That which is dead is less important than that which will die. There is work to be done.

A name to be spoken.

Tsi Rekh climbs again. He reaches the ledge. It is a path, sloping up and curving into the rock. It will lead him into the nautilus. He waits for his acolytes to gather behind him and then starts forward.

The path itself is a coil. The sides of the rock fissure are barely wide enough to permit passage. The light from the torches feels weak, as if the rock absorbs the shine. The pilgrims walk into the spiral of midnight. Then there is a sharp turn, and they are out. They stand in the interior of the peak. Perhaps the mountain was once a volcano. This might be a crater. If it is, then the volcano has been extinct for a very long time.

'Put out the torches,' Tsi Rekh says, obeying not an instinct but a command. He hears it in his head, and the voice belongs to Akshub. Another memory. She gave him the command forty years ago, then buried it.

The acolytes do as he says. The fires die but the light does not. There is a wash over this space. Grey of mould, green of rot and white of hate. It roils and shifts, it turns, it–

It looks. The light *sees*.

And it is bladed. A beam glances over the ground, sweeps over the pilgrims. One, Hath Khri, reaches up

with her arms in ecstasy and the light cuts through them. She falls, blood spouting from stumps below the elbow. She gasps her praise to the gods.

Movement must be earned, Tsi Rekh thinks. It must be understood as a gift. It must be presented as a form of worship.

Hath Khri turns toward him. She smiles before she dies, bleeding out onto the cold rock.

Like Beschak, this was her moment. All in the service of the path Tsi Rekh must walk.

Mmmmmmmm…

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa…

There are ruins everywhere. They are low, broken, vague. Impossible to tell what they had once been. Tsi Rekh sees the trace of walls, the gaps of doorways. Nothing else. Simply the ghosts of history, a phantasm of a time when the Davinites built something more substantial than yurts.

There are other echoes of this time, of course – the lodges themselves. And in the centre of the hollow peak rises the Lodge of Echoes, the greatest of them all. It is the source of the light. This light, Tsi Rekh realizes, is another manifestation of the echoes. If he had the skills, perhaps he would see more than the glow of thought's decay. He is humbled by the revelation of how far he has yet to go.

The Lodge of Echoes is suspended above the ground by eight huge pillars. They are squat, wider than they are high, though they are five times taller than Tsi Rekh. The structure they support is vast, monolithic. Its side walls are vertical, smooth as glass, regular as iron, but they are stone. The four corners are turrets but the towers bend in at sharp angles to point towards the centre of the roof like clutching talons.

The front of the lodge is different. This wall is not smooth. It is a complex of whorls, depressions and protuberances. The glow dances over the shapes, revealing and concealing details, creating shadows and meanings that shift, slippery, into something new before they can be understood. The wall is disease. It is song. It is the echoes given shape in stone, and it is their medium. It is the agent of their transmission to the whole of Davin.

And inside? Inside is the origin of the echoes. Inside is Tsi Rekh's quest. Inside lies his destiny.

Inside is what he must accomplish.

He must open the way.

But there is no door. He has stood before the gates to the Temple of the Serpent Lodge, where Horus was given the truth. Those gates are majestic in size and power. They are masterpieces of art, their engraving of the serpent-entwined tree beyond anything the Davinites could accomplish today, and greater even than those of the Lodge of the Hound. No amount of pride can deny that it was right that that particular ritual should take place in the home of the Serpents. The gates might as well be the work of the gods themselves.

Here, gripped by holy awe, Tsi Rekh has the sensation that the lodge might *be* a god. How should he presume to bend it to his will? He cannot even see how to reach the height of the temple. The pillars are too high and too smooth to scale.

He moves forward, wary of the lethal light. His disciples fall into line behind him. He can feel the caress of edges against his limbs, against his throat. Hath Khri's propitiation has been sufficient. They approach without harm. No other blood is drawn. For the moment, at least.

As they walk through the ruins, Tsi Rekh feels the thrum of the structures' ghosts. There are flickers of the earlier vision at the edge of his consciousness. With them arrives understanding: what is important is not what was destroyed, but the fact of its destruction. That is the gift that fell upon Davin. It is the gift that is now being renewed. The gift that is travelling the galaxy.

The ruins end outside a circular space surrounding the Lodge of Echoes. There is nothing between this perimeter and the lodge except blackened stone. Tsi Rekh stops. He pulls his serpent-headed staff from

the leather straps holding it to his back. He holds it high in response to the prickling he feels on the back of his neck. There are eyes nearby.

They are not divine. They are human.

One by one, from widely separated points along the edge of the ruins, come the other priests, and with them are their followers. The priests hold up their staffs too. There are different heads upon each: bear, hawk, crow, wild cat, hound, wolf, wyrm, rat…

They are all here, all the lodges of Davin. The priests regard each other with hatred.

We have all been drawn here, Tsi Rekh thinks. He wonders if Akshub visited every clan, whispering words of prophecy and fate. Were they all lies? Is there no destiny here for him? No echo that is his and his alone?

Thrum and choir surround him, ***Mmmmmmmmm… Aaaaaaaaaa…*** and his fears vanish. He would not have been bred from childhood for a pointless game. He sweeps his eyes over his approaching rivals. He suppresses a smile, though a sharp lower canine pokes out from his lip. These others are not his peers. Some do not wear armour, and he towers a good head over most of them. His weapons transcend the crude blades he sees in the hands and hanging from the leather belts of these people who walk beneath the banners of lesser beasts. The priests' staffs alone are the equal in workmanship to his own, but they are all holy relics, passed down through the millennia.

Behind Tsi Rekh, there is the sound of weapons being drawn. He brings the tip of his staff down hard on the rock. The *crack* is sharp, startling. Its echoes do not vanish. The physical sound goes on too long, grows louder than the original noise, then is incorporated into the ocean of psychic whispering.

'State your business here,' Tsi Rekh commands.

'State yours,' says the priest of the Wild Cat. He steps forward as chief rival. His armour is as elaborate as Tsi Rekh's. Crimson metal bands circle his torso and limbs. His pauldrons are horned. A great furred pelt hangs from his shoulders. The fingers of his right gauntlet extend into iron claws as long as his forearm. In his left hand is a curved, serrated blade. His boots, too, are clawed. He is ready to challenge, eager for battle. He believes himself superior to Tsi Rekh.

What an illusion. What ignorance. He will be taught.

They all should know. They all should know their place.

'I am here to open the Lodge of Echoes, and to claim it in the name of the Lodge of the Hound,' says Tsi Rekh.

The priest of the Wild Cat glares. His mane of hair appears to bristle. Behind him, and to his right, stand followers of the Lodge of the Serpent. The new priestess, some acolyte of Akshub, wears armour of long, curved, warding spikes on her shoulders, and her robe is finer than the rags worn by her followers. Her face is unreadable. Tsi Rekh wonders if she knows about her mistress's contact with the Lodge of the Hound. Does she know that the next phase of destiny has passed from her lodge? Is she foolish enough to think Akshub disloyal?

No. No one is that mad. There can be no challenge to Akshub. Davin has never had a prophet of her like.

A whisper echoes in the depth of his mind. *Not since…*

Not since when? Why, for the first time in his life, does he believe there was another?

Memory. A new one. Fresh. From the night before he set out, yet Akshub had buried it for him too. Uncovered now, words of prophecy: *I am the opener of the ways. He is the walker of the ways. You will be the way.*

Knowledge without understanding, promises couched in riddles.

Tsi Rekh swallows his impatience. Revelation will come. He smiles, taking pride in that certainty.

The priest of the Wild Cat sees the smile as an insult. 'The Lodge of Echoes is not for the likes of you,'

he says. ‘It has been promised to me.’

‘Who made you that promise?’

‘The gods granted me a vision.’

Tsi Rekh continues to smile. Oh, the lesson that is about to descend upon this pretender! How weak a claim. Tsi Rekh is not here because of a dream shaped by his own desires. He is here by the command of the gods.

But why are all the lodges here?

He dismisses the question and the doubts. The answer doesn’t matter. Only the prophecy is important. Only his destiny. Unalterable and glorious.

‘Leave or die,’ he says, but the choice is a lie. He has already begun the attack.

He does not move. His acolytes charge past him, hissing wrath. The followers of the Lodge of the Wild Cat rush to meet them, their priest remaining just as motionless. He and Tsi Rekh stare at each other. Between them, the butchery begins. The killing is an extension of their wills. Their underlings might as well have no volition of their own. They are their masters’ instruments as much as the weapons they hold.

Blood splashes on the ground. People die in violence and hatred. And the light changes. It absorbs the blood. It shifts towards the crimson. It grows stronger. Patterns on the face of the Lodge of Echoes twist. Lines appear. The echoes grow louder, more eager. More death, more blood, and the lodge feeds. Tsi Rekh can feel the touch of the light upon his skin. It is cold, dry, and it grips like victory.

Understanding. Revelation.

He and the Wild Cat look at each other. Their antagonism evaporates. They know that they are instruments. They know what must happen. So do all the other priests. And so, thanks to their faith, do all the assembled acolytes. Without needing an order, they run to the slaughter. The priests step back to give them room and gather together at the edge of the ruins.

In the empty ground before the lodge, hundreds of worshippers fall upon each other with blades, fists and teeth. The battle is savage. It must be. The massacre must be total and it must be bloody. This is not about victory. There is no attempt to triumph. There is only the need for pain, for the rending of flesh. Blood everywhere, slicking hands and faces and bodies. And all the time, joining in the exultant, gorging echoes, the songs of dark praise. The acolytes know that they have been blessed. They have lived this long to give their lives to the gods now, in this place, for this purpose. They bleed for this purpose. They will not live to see it fulfilled, but they die in the certainty that their sacrifice will lead to the deaths of entire worlds.

If something greater did not await him, Tsi Rekh would envy them.

The light is still dry, a caress of scales, but the air is humid, redolent with the heat of opened bodies, the stench of bowels, the slick of gore. The lodge feeds. From deep within its walls, something begins to sound, huge and earthshaking.

Heartbeat, drumbeat, and the hammering of a fist upon a door.

The lines on the wall lengthen and join. They outline an opening, one that has not existed since the lodge was completed and its sole occupant entered.

Occupant.

How does Tsi Rekh know this? Because as the door comes into being, and the slaughter reaches its completion, the visions and the echoes shout to him, teach him, seize him. His knees buckle. For a moment, he is not outside the lodge. He is not Tsi Rekh. He is inside, surrounded by the all the shapes and jaws and the gibbering of darkness. Inside, watching the door arrive. Inside, the walker of the ways, ecstatic as the great promise at last comes to pass.

The beat of the lodge is in the special echo too – Tsi Rekh’s echo. The name so large it must be carved out of the spirit one sound at a time. A great hammering caesura strikes the choir.

Mmmmmmmmmmm…

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa…

D-D-D-D…

Tsi Rekh, back in his own being, back outside, claps a hand to his head. The stuttering *D*, a short, sudden shatter, threatens to crack his skull in half. The name has a form. It is incomplete, but he can begin to pronounce it with his tongue. He dare not, for fear of angering the power. He will not insult it with a half-name.

He blinks back the pain and rises to his feet again. He will stand as the door opens. Is he the only one to be afflicted? Are none of the other priests struggling? Perhaps they are. He cannot tell. He cannot look. His gaze is held by the lodge, by the formation of the door.

By the opening of the way.

The walker of the ways is coming.

The door is complete. The pounding from the interior is also coming from the ground, from the air, from behind Tsi Rekh's eyes. The pulse of the Lodge of Echoes and the battering against the walls of reality are one and the same.

And now the glory. The door opens.

The grind of stone, crackle of energy and a sigh from a bladed throat. Two massive slabs on the façade have come into being, and they open outwards. Echoes, long contained, fly out from the dark interior, louder than ever, crowing victory.

A ramp emerges, stone deploying as though it were articulated metal. It stretches down to the blood-soaked earth. For a minute, there is nothing more, nothing except the ecstatic, mad choir of the echoes.

Then a figure appears in the doorway.

A silhouette first. Big. Ill-defined, infected by the shadows of the lodge. Now clearer, the truth of the form announcing itself. The declaration is fearsome. The walker is twice the size of the Davinites. It walks on two legs. One is thick, hoofed. The other is a jointed arachnid limb. The being's syncopated gait should be clumsy, a broken limp, but it moves with grace and the suggestion of barely restrained speed. The torso wears a robe… No, Tsi Rekh realizes. That is no robe. It is flesh, this being's own flesh. It hangs from the torso, sickly white, dropping away from exposed bones, transformed into a long sheet, marked by runes of blood and tattoos that blink and mutter. The exposed sections of skeleton look blackened by fire, but glint with coils of barbed iron. The arms have been denuded of all flesh and their joints have multiplied. They resemble long spinal columns, ending in long, elegant hands that gesture with the care of knives.

The head.

The face.

Tsi Rekh revels in the debasement of the human. It is part of his life's mission, but his throat goes dry before this sight. He has never seen the transformative art of disfigurement taken so far. There is no doubt that this being was *once* human – there is just enough recognisable in the face to mark the beginning of the walker's journey. This wonder, this transcendence, was once as Tsi Rekh is now.

Such a miracle.

The face.

The skull has grown, bulbous encrustations of bone swelling in many directions. A horn sprouts from just above the right cheekbone. It curves upward then branches into two, the extremities sharp enough to cut dreams. The lower jaw juts forwards, as long as Tsi Rekh's forearm. Some of the teeth are still human. Others belong to an ancient carnivore. At the tip are a serpent's fangs. The upper jaw starts wide but then narrows to a point. It is a black beak. Lips hang, torn, on either side of the jaws. All the flesh of the head

is in tatters, strips and strings of muscle. The forehead, the bone masses and whorls mirroring the patterns on the lodge, is filled with eyes.

The human is long gone, but it *was* there, once. Its banishment is a gift beyond measure.

The miracle walks down the ramp, its gestures flowing. It will tangle all that is real in its dance. It stops midway and sweeps its many eyes over the priests. It pauses for a moment when it comes to Tsi Rekh.

...blind another's eyes another's thought an immensity waiting at the other end of the way learn its name its name its name...

New sound, new signification, after the hum, after the choir, after the stutter, the wail.

Aaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiii…

Tsi Rekh blinks. He sees again, in time for the next wonder.

The being spreads its arms. It speaks. How can it speak, with that mouth that is not a mouth, those lips in two parts, with the serpentine tongue embedded with bone shards? It speaks because it must, because the time has come at last for its voice to be heard. It speaks with the echoes. The legion of voices and memories and crimes are one, the instrument of a single will. The voice booms. Tsi Rekh shakes. The air shakes. The *mountain* shakes.

'Children of Davin,' the being says. ***'Children of the gods.*** **My *children. I am Ghehashren.'***

Ghehashren. The night writhes beneath the force of the name. *Ghehashren*. The prophet who first brought the word of the gods to Davin. There was a Davin before his revelation and Tsi Rekh understands that this was the Davin in the dead fragments of dreams he saw before. And there was a Davin afterwards, the Davin that built the lodges as its last act before the great fall. Ghehashren is the father of all that Davin has become. His memory has sat enthroned in the Lodge of Echoes, governing all others. He is Davin's beacon. He taught the people how to worship, and when the Lodge of Echoes was complete, he disappeared into it to walk the ways.

Tsi Rekh knows all this now, because the prophet of the warp has returned, and with him has come clarity for his children. Before this moment the name was holy, its teachings followed, but its legends as vague as the echoes themselves. Now Ghehashren is here and all will be revealed. The time of prophecies is over. The time of their fulfilment has begun.

Ghehashren leans back. He looks up at the sky as if to pronounce its doom. His arms embracing the whole world.

And then he shouts. For the whole world.

'Gather!'

And Davin gathers. The summons is heard around the globe – not just as a stronger echo, not just as a voice in the soul, but as a sound. There is no escaping it. There is no disobeying it.

And so the people come. They begin walking the very second the word reaches them. The migration of millions begins. The prophet has called.

Ghehashren climbs to the outer rim of the peak. He carries with him the light from the lodge. It pulses and flows from him, a liquid illness, coating the mountainside. The realm of endless night becomes a beacon of diseased illumination. The prophet stands there, visible across the plain, and waits.

The priests wait too, in silence. They will not speak until he gives them leave. All language belongs to Ghehashren. There is no meaning except that which he creates, and so they wait. They survive by eating the bodies of their acolytes.

Seven days pass and then Ghehashren calls to them. They file out through the spiral path in the rock and take their places on the ledge below the father of Davin.

As the seventh day ends, hundreds of thousands of worshippers throng the great plain, with more arriving

all the time. Seeing the multitudes, Ghehashren opens his mouth and teaches them, saying, ***'Blessed are the cruel, and the carriers of plague. Blessed are the driven, and the killers, and the defilers of order. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst, who rage and curse, who stand with me before the gods, for the death of the galaxy will be theirs!'***

The people cry out to the glory that stalks the peak. Their adulation is added to the echoes and Ghehashren thunders ever louder. Davin vibrates with his tones.

But Tsi Rekh, through his awe, feels a lack. There is an echo missing. *His* echo. It is not a part of Ghehashren's tapestry of meaning and it does not speak to the priest any longer. Absence. A fault in his soul. It has abandoned him at the penultimate moment, when it was about to grant him its full name, and so reveal his destiny. Where has it gone?

Bereft…

How did it go?

The hum… How…

No. He cannot even find that.

There is Ghehashren's sermon, and that is enough. It is more than enough.

But still…

Ghehashren says, ***'Think not that I am come to destroy the universe of law. Nor have I come to fulfil the prophecies. That is for* you*. You, my children, shall be that fulfilment. You will carry the flame to burn the galaxy. I have come to charge you with your great task. I have walked the ways of the gods, and you see my blessings. I have travelled between the stars, and touched the worlds of the enemy. Now you will follow in my footsteps. You have waited and served on this planet. That wait and service are at an end. Now is the time to leave the cradle of Davin and spread the truth of the gods. Now is the time of* exodus!'**

He pauses. ***'You will travel. How will you travel? In the guise of sheep.'***

He brings his hands together. They compress space between them. He sinks his claws into the air. Tsi Rekh's eyes widen as he bears witness to the tearing of the flesh of space. Ghehashren clenches his fists, and the vertebrae of those serpentine arms flex. He tears the real open.

The rip shoots up, a wound of blood and flame. From within, a deeper night appears, the night of the void. The rip spreads wider as it reaches up. The low clouds are torn asunder. The sky peels back. The materium shrieks, and from the warp comes a fleet.

At low anchor over Davin are ships of every description. Tsi Rekh should not be able to see them so clearly, but the rip summoned by Ghehashren makes them appear as close as if they were in the lower atmosphere.

Or if he were suspended on the edge of the void.

Merchant. Military. Colony transport. Tsi Rekh understands the broad types of the ships, but only at the most basic level. The vessels are ancient. They are battered, worn, and the warp has gnawed at them, leaving the marks of its teeth. The longer Tsi Rekh looks up, the closer his perspective comes to the ships. He can now pick out individual details. He focuses on one freighter. He marvels at its size. He wonders how many thousands it might carry. But none of them has ever set foot in a starship. He will not question Ghehashren, but cannot understand how the prophet expects the people of Davin to get aboard. And even then, how are they to pilot these vessels? He sees within the bridge now. It is massive.

He is *on* the bridge. Surrounded by the control surfaces. He is standing beside the command throne. A frayed mechadendrite coils beside him. He reaches out. He grasps the limp cable. He can feel the metallic ridges against his palm.

He gasps.

He is back on the mountainside, blinking, stunned by awe and terror. In his hand is a piece of the mechadendrite. He stares at it, then looks up at Ghehashren. Some of the prophet's eyes have turned his way. Ghehashren's mouth is not capable of expression, yet the beak and the jaw are parted slightly, as if in a smile.

'Do you see?' Ghehashren asks. The voice is soft, for Tsi Rekh alone.

The priest nods.

He knows of Akshub's ability to travel behind the barriers, to arrive in an instant anywhere on Davin. How much greater the prophet's power must be, after walking so long in the realm of the gods. Thousands of years in the Lodge of Echoes, long enough for the old Davin to pass away, long enough to become the marvel of horror that strides along the ridges of the peak. The scale of what Ghehashren will accomplish staggers him anew. The prophet will transport the people to the ships. Will he or some other power guide them to their destinations? That truth is hidden.

But this truth is upon him: the walker of the ways will *be* the Exodus.

The people are shouting, crying, screaming in the ecstasies of faith. They praise Ghehashren, they praise the gods. There is a massive surge forward towards the base of the mountain, where the rip waits, in blood and darkness and the torment of light. But Ghehashren holds up a hand, and the surge stops in an instant. The thousands upon thousands see and hear and obey.

The prophet looks down upon the priests.

'All lodges are one,' he declares, and Tsi Rekh can see the truth of that pronouncement. The masses below are a unity, fused together by the fire of their mission, and by the thunder of the Lodge of Echoes. Ghehashren continues, ***'But the followers of the one will need voices of guidance. My journey is not with you. And so I shall give each of you charges.'***

Serpent and Wild Cat, Wolf and Bear, Wyrm and Rat, they all face each other with new purpose. Rivalry died in the sacrifice of their followers. They are tiny instruments in the hands of the Ruinous Powers. What wars and schisms may wage in times to come are not for them to decide. The greatest of them all has spoken. The honour of their task and the promise of infinite corruption is all they need.

Tsi Rekh needs more. He hides his anger. He will never disobey the commands of the transcendent being who has come among them, but he will not be robbed of his destiny.

Where is his echo?

It can be in only one place.

The other priests descend from the mountain, and the great partitioning begins. The masses know by instinct whom they are meant to follow. Destiny has come to all. Ghehashren speaks the will of the gods, and his thunder guides the preparations.

Tsi Rekh dares the great forbidden. To pass one more time through the cleft in the mountain. To spiral through stone. To stand before the Lodge of Echoes. Alone.

To mount the ramp.

He will find his destiny. It must be here. The echo will come back to him. It will complete the lesson that was intended for him and no other. Fate has called him this far. It cannot have been a trick. Not with the name so close to revelation.

The ramp is not stone. It is bone, and the marrow of compressed echoes. Whispers move under his feet. For the first time in his life, Tsi Rekh knows fear untouched by the conviction of faith. He fears punishment but he walks on. He reaches the entrance to the lodge. He must not pause.

He crosses the threshold.

The echo is here. It is massive. It strikes. It uses all of his senses to speak at last the full measure of the name.

The hum. The choir. The stutter. The wail.

And the constriction, serpent strong. ***LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII…***

The name is taking Tsi Rekh in its claws.

MADAIL.

MADAIL.

MADAIL.

Carving him open. Revelation yes, knowledge yes, truth yes, all claws, all teeth, all pain.

Wonder of destiny. Agony of fate.

He will be the passage. He will be the way.

Vision returns, and he is on the ground outside the lodge, Ghehashren standing over him. The parting of the beak and jaw, that smile of darkness. The gaze of all the eyes.

The prophet speaks. No thunder. A whisper using the returned echo, knowledge shared by the two of them alone. *'You understand?'*

Tsi Rekh nods. The full sweep of the glory that awaits still unfolding in his mind. The destruction he will wreak. The name he will serve.

MADAIL.

'I will be the passage,' he whispers, throat bleeding.

'One more gift,' Ghehashren says, and speaks two names. They are death, rattle and hiss. They await at the end of the path.

Pandorax.

Pythos.

BY THE LION'S COMMAND

Gav Thorpe

‘Seneschal, do we open fire?’

Chapter Master Belath’s question cut across the din of warning klaxons. Corswain tore his eyes from the sensor display, away from the runes that showed traitor ships arrowing towards the centre of the fleet like a spear aimed for his heart. Signal returns confirmed that they were the same Death Guard ships that he had chased across twelve devastated star systems.

‘What are the separatists doing?’ the seneschal demanded as he looked to Urizel, who was overseeing the augury consoles.

‘Their vessels are powering up, seneschal. No locking scans detected.’ The legionary leaned over the wasted forms of the slaved servitors to examine the main screen. ‘Reactor spikes in the orbital stations. Weapons are arming. Torpedo tubes are closed.’

Corswain took the news without comment while Belath paced back and forth across the quarterdeck of the strategium, whispering curses.

‘If you have something to say,’ Corswain muttered, ‘then speak it.’

‘I was merely regretting the decision to come to Argeus without the full Legion, seneschal,’ Belath replied, regaining his composure.

‘*My* decision, you mean. You raised little objection at the command council.’

‘With respect, seneschal, it is of no consequence how we come to be here. Do we open fire on the separatists? We cannot allow them the first volley.’

Corswain turned. ‘Do not open fire! Manoeuvre the fleet to counter the Death Guard approach. All ships to reform on our position.’

‘That will bring more of the fleet into range of the orbital platforms and expose us to the rebels,’ Belath protested.

‘I issued an order, Chapter Master. I did not invite opinion. We will meet the Death Guard in battle.’

‘But the rebels–’

‘President-General Remercus has observed the agreed truce thus far. If the separatists wished to attack us, they have already had ample opportunity.’

‘Unless they were waiting for something.’

‘Carry out my orders.’ Corswain did not shout, but his curt tone forestalled any further debate.

Belath nodded reluctantly and moved to the communications array to one side of the command deck. From here he relayed the order to the other eleven Dark Angels vessels currently standing off from the so-called ‘Free Army of Terra Nullius’.

It was not the first time that the Dark Angels had encountered a world that had ceded from the Imperium and yet not dedicated itself to Horus; it was, however, the most military. Seven capital ships and transports for more than three hundred thousand men had gathered at this proclaimed safe haven. It was a force that could conquer whole systems, idly waiting for the civil war to resolve itself.

On the display, the lead ships of the Death Guard fleet approached the outlying Dark Angels vessels. The three smaller escort ships retreated towards the strike cruisers and battle-barges of the main fleet, speeding out of range before they came under any fire.

It was no satisfaction to Corswain that the Librarians' telepathic auguries of the traitor fleet's location had been proven true. If only he had shown more faith in their abilities, then he would not now be outnumbered and out of position between two potential foes.

'Communications – send priority transmission to the President-General. Redirect to my quarters.'

Belath frowned. 'You're leaving the strategium?'

'You may be new to the command of the Second Order, Chapter Master, but I have every confidence you will respond properly to this attack. I have other matters that demand my attention.'

As Corswain departed the strategium, two legionaries from his personal guard fell in behind their commander. He stopped to address them.

'Return to the command deck to assist Chapter Master Belath. Be sure to remind him that he is not to fire on the Free Army, or their orbital stations, unless they directly target us.'

The Space Marines saluted in acknowledgement and turned away, leaving Corswain to walk unattended. His kept the vox-channel open to monitor the unfolding fleet action – in the two minutes it took him to reach the door of his personal chambers, the Death Guard had broken off their headlong rush, having failed to take the pickets unawares with their ambush. It seemed that they were regrouping for a more concerted thrust towards the Dark Angels.

As the door hissed closed behind him, Corswain slumped against the wall beside it, his armour whining as it strove to match his sagging frame. The seneschal closed his eyes and rested his head against the bare metal, trying to think.

'A foolish errand,' he muttered, echoing the words Grand Master Haradin had spoken at the council.

Perhaps it had been foolish, but the council had demanded – albeit in a veiled manner – that Corswain take the lead.

A sharp crack cut through the raised voices as Corswain slammed his sheathed sword onto the worn wood of the table. The Seneschal of the Dark Angels glared at the assembled Masters of the Legion.

'Shouting at cross-purposes gets us nowhere.'

Silenced for the moment, the eight commanders sat back in their seats, glowering at one another. Corswain took a breath and looked to each of them in turn. They regarded him warily.

'What else would you have me do?' he demanded. 'The Lion's last command, a command he gave to me in person, was to bring word of his actions to Lord Russ of the Space Wolves, and to engage the enemy wherever possible.'

'The enemy are to be found everywhere, Russ nowhere,' said Haradin, Grand Master of the Third Order. Two of his Chapter Masters, Nerael and Zanthus, nodded their approval. 'Was it really the Lion's intent to split the Legion over so many systems?'

'We are but fifteen thousand light years from Caliban,' said Astrovel, Fourth Chapter Master of the Seventh Order. 'We should see first to the defence of our home world.' He shook his head, his scarred face grim. 'The Lion would give us short regard if we chased after this Death Guard traitor, only to allow the foe to fall upon Caliban as they have hundreds of other worlds.'

'We chase shadows,' said Haradin. 'A dozen systems we have scoured for this foe, and we find each in uproar or destroyed, tainted by his presence. He leads us away from the strength of the Death Guard on purpose – I would swear to it.'

Corswain looked to his right, where Dalmeon stood to one side of the council, and the Librarian

stepped closer to the table at a gesture from the seneschal. 'I cannot divine his intent, but we have had some success in finding his location. There are certain portents that we believe point to Typhon's next target. The warp is in turmoil, riven by the powers of darkness, and wherever we look we see destruction and despair. Despite this, our auguries point to the Argeus system, some two hundred light years from our present position.'

'Thank you, Dalmeon.' Corswain looked at the other commanders. 'We cannot know where Mortarion and the rest of the Death Guard linger, but we have unfinished business with Typhon.'

'Surely you don't intend to move all of our forces on this evidence?' said Haradin. 'With no offence to our brother Librarian, such visions could amount to nothing. A foolish errand.'

'You are right,' Corswain sighed, lifting his sword from the table and hooking it back onto his belt. 'Warp-scrying has never been an exact art.'

'The empyrean is a fickle power,' said Astrovel, regarding Dalmeon with narrowed eyes. 'It was for good reason that the Emperor forbade the use of such... talents.'

'That matter was settled by the Lion,' said Corswain. 'Needs dictate a new perspective.'

'A perspective Brother-Redemptor Nemiel did not share,' said Astrovel. 'I would not countermand the will of the Lion, but we cannot know his full intent in such matters.'

'I think the Lion made his position perfectly clear,' said Haradin. 'At least, there is no further argument from Nemiel, is there?'

'This gossip is pointless,' snapped Corswain. 'Were the Lion here, such words would not flow so easily from your lips, Grand Master. I am his authority now – you will show me equal respect.'

'So I ask again, what do you intend for the Legion?' asked Haradin. 'This is the third council you have brought me to, and yet our objective is no clearer and no closer than before the first.'

'Watch your tongue, brother,' glowered Belath, newly promoted to command of the Second Order. 'Your accusations are not needed here. The Lion named Corswain as his second. Surely you do not dispute the wishes of the primarch?'

Haradin stared in silence at him. Corswain knew the veteran Grand Master's words had not been intended as an insult – simply a goad for him to make a decision. Corswain felt the gazes of the council upon him and wondered why the Lion had chosen him for this task; he wished that another had been placed in command. But that was not to be, and Corswain had sworn to his primarch that he would lead in his stead. A decision had to be made.

'You are right,' Corswain said again, directing his words to Haradin. 'To send the whole fleet on such scant information would be foolish. The Legion will break by Orders, and I will travel with Belath and the Second. We will move to Argeus to find the truth of the matter, with force sufficient for the task if Typhon is to be found there. The rest of you will continue our search of the neighbouring systems, to locate the Space Wolves or bring the fight to the enemy as you find them.'

'That is your command?' asked Haradin, looking unconvinced.

'It is,' said Corswain. 'Spread word to the rest of the Legion. The fleet will disperse in twelve hours.'

The Grand Master shrugged. 'As you order, seneschal, so we will obey.'

'*Seneschal, we have contact with President-General Remercus*.'

Corswain opened his eyes and strode across the small antechamber to the communications monitor. He entered his cipher code and the screen flickered into life, revealing the face of the separatists' leader.

When Corswain had first met him, Remercus had seemed surprisingly young; a slight man no more than forty Terran years of age. His hair was cut short, but there were threads of grey in his carefully trimmed beard.

'*As I predicted, you have brought your war to Terra Nullius, Corswain. I warned you that your presence here made mockery of our neutrality.*'

'The Death Guard were already here,' Corswain replied, keeping his temper in check. 'It is convenient, is it not, that they eluded detection by your fleet.'

'*I do not doubt that the eyes of the Legiones Astartes can see into every asteroid field and dust cloud, but those of the Free Army cannot. Perhaps they followed your fleet to the system. I find it a remarkable coincidence that both the Dark Angels and Death Guard happen upon our world in such a short space of time.*'

'It is no coincidence, Remercus. We have hunted this fleet for a hundred days. We would have brought them to battle somewhere. Perhaps the greater coincidence is finding them here, where so many ships and soldiers of the Imperium stand idle.'

'*We have debated this before; do you wish to have the same arguments again, Corswain? Terra Nullius is not interested in this war waged amongst the Legions. If either fleet attempts to land troops on our planet, we will protect ourselves.*'

The internal vox-link crackled into life before Corswain could reply, temporarily muting the President-General. It was Belath.

'*Seneschal, the Death Guard are five minutes from effective range. The fleet is performing defensive manoeuvres but it would be wise to launch a pre-emptive strike. They outgun us, Corswain. We cannot allow them to gain the upper hand in position as well.*'

Corswain sighed. 'Remain within range of the orbital batteries. Launch anti-torpedo drones and attack craft. Manoeuvre for line of engagement.'

'*We have little room to move, seneschal. To form a line of battle will take us into the Free Army vessels. We waste time while you treat with these rebels.*'

'I am fully aware of the strategic situation, Chapter Master, and *I* will judge the best use of my time. Execute my commands.'

Corswain severed the link and turned his attention back to the President-General.

'Time is pressing, so I will be frank. There is no neutrality in this war. There are no bystanders. You say it is waged by the Legiones Astartes. Perhaps, but billions have died already that did not seek conflict.'

'*Is that a threat, Seneschal Corswain of the Dark Angels?*'

Remercus looked away for a moment and exchanged words with someone, too quietly for Corswain to hear over the transmission. When he turned back to the communicator, his eyes were wide with anger.

'*You move your ships towards my fleet? A cowardly tactic, using poorly armed transports as shields against your enemies. You show your true colours too soon, Corswain. Just as during the Great Crusade, you will build your victory upon the bodies of much humbler men.*'

'Countless dead legionaries would stand as argument to that accusation,' Corswain replied, riled by the implication of Remercus's words. 'How many of my brothers lie dead thanks to the frailties of the humble? How many of my brothers laid down their lives to stem a breach in the line opened by fleeing cowards, or died in the first assault so that Imperial Army regiments could advance uncontested? You know your words are as empty as the promises of Horus.'

'*I have heard no such promises, if that is your meaning. What manner of man are you that you so desire war you cannot comprehend the motives of those of us who would desire a life without it?*'

Another report from Belath punctured Corswain's indignation, giving him a moment to collect his thoughts. '*Seneschal, the Free Army ships are dispersing.*'

'The Death Guard should be your only concern, Chapter Master. What are they doing?'

'*Forming up for an attack against our line. We need to turn and match them, or they will be able to*

concentrate their firepower on one part of the fleet.'

'What heading?'

'*Seneschal?*'

'On what heading are the Death Guard approaching, Chapter Master? Against which part of the fleet will they bring their attack to bear?'

There was a pause while Belath retrieved this information.

'*They are coming for* us*, seneschal.* Wrath's Descent *would appear to be at the centre of their attack axis. We should bring the vanguard about to support.*'

'All ships are to remain on course as previously ordered. The Death Guard attack is a feint. They would not dare to come within range of the orbital batteries.'

'*Is it wise to rely on the separatists, seneschal? Their ships make no move to counter the Death Guard approach.*'

'I am not relying on the Free Army, Belath, I am depending upon the tactical instincts of our foe. Only a madman would dare engage an enemy under the cover of orbital defences. The Death Guard commander is trying to force us into a direct clash, which would bring us out of range of the batteries.'

'*Is that a gamble we can risk? What assurance have you had that the rebels are not at this very moment in communication with the enemy commander?*'

'Superior wisdom will prevail, Chapter Master. Do not forget the lessons of the spiral, though the teaching may have fallen out of favour of late. One must bring the enemy close, into one's own ground, to ensure victory.'

'*I fail to see the relevance of the lesson in this situation, seneschal. Surely it would be wiser to meet force with equal force? If we cannot, then– Damn, incoming torpedoes!*'

The vox went dead, and a moment later the warning sirens wailed, alerting the crew to brace for impact. Corswain overrode the alarm inside his chambers and restored the link to Remercus.

'*I am not sure I have your full attention, Seneschal Corswain,*' said the President-General.

'You do not, Remercus.' The situation lent haste to his words and Corswain's patience was worn thin by the man's insolence. 'My fleet is under attack from a traitor force. A force you are aiding by your continued inaction. Emperor damn you, will you sit there and watch us be destroyed?'

'*I have no choice,*' said Remercus, his regret seemingly genuine. He dolefully shook his head. '*What am I to do? If I aid the Dark Angels now, we make ourselves enemies of the Death Guard. If we come to the assistance of Mortarion's Legion, then your battle-brothers will not be slow in seeking vengeance. The galaxy burns, seneschal, and we are all caught up in the flames. But if we are patient we can pass through this conflagration, if not unscathed, then at least alive.*'

Corswain sought a retort to Remercus's honest assessment of the situation, but one did not spring to mind. The galaxy had ever been divided into two camps for him: those to fight against, and those to fight alongside. He thought of the Night Lords – of how he had spent time studying them, and had considered them allies even though their methods had seemed alien and barbarous. Though he had been as shocked as any by Horus's treachery, he had not been surprised by Curze's faithlessness.

Ally had so easily become *enemy*.

Now he was confronted with the possibility that there was a third view, a grey area that contained neither friend nor foe. When the Lion had told him that matters were more complex than Corswain could imagine, perhaps it had been a situation such as this that the primarch had foreseen.

'We are living in complex times, Cor, and there is no easy division between those who fight on our side and those who fight against us. Antagonism towards Horus and his Legions no longer guarantees

fealty to the Emperor. There are other powers exercising their right to dominion.'

'I don't understand, my liege,' confessed Corswain. 'Who else would one swear loyalty to, other than Horus or the Emperor?'

'Tell me, whom do you serve?' the Lion asked in reply to the question.

Corswain replied immediately, drawing himself up straight as if accused. 'Terra, my liege, and the cause of the Emperor.'

'And what of your oaths to me, little brother?' The Lion's voice was quiet, contemplative. 'Are you not loyal to the Dark Angels?'

'Of course, my liege!' Corswain was taken aback by the suggestion that he might think otherwise.

'And so there are other forces whose foremost concern is their primarch and Legion, and for some perhaps not even that,' the Lion explained. 'If I told you we were to abandon any pretence of defending Terra, what would you say?'

'Please do not joke about such things,' Corswain muttered, shaking his head. 'We cannot allow Horus to prevail in this war.'

'Who said I was talking about Horus...?'

The primarch closed his eyes, and rubbed his brow for a few moments. Then he looked at Corswain, gauging his mettle. 'It is not for you to concern yourself, little brother. Prepare the task force, and let greater burdens sit upon my shoulders alone.'

That burden now rested firmly upon Corswain's shoulders, too. It been hard to watch the Lion leave, but the seneschal had understood, as best he could, the reasons for the primarch's departure. Events unfolding on the Eastern Fringe could not be ignored, and maybe presented as much of a threat to the Emperor as Horus's own treachery. Or so the Lion had implied.

The first time he had assembled the command council, the seneschal had asked himself what the Lion would do in the same situation. It had been a fruitless exercise. Corswain believed that he knew his primarch better than most, but the Lion's thoughts and strategies were as far beyond the seneschal's understanding as a human's to an insect. The primarchs saw the universe in ways he never could, and to second-guess their motivations was to invite endless frustration.

'*No swift reply, Seneschal Corswain? No trite argument to persuade me of the merit of sacrificing my soldiers?*'

Remercus snapped Corswain back from his thoughts, to the pressing matter. He could feel and hear the battle-barge trembling as cannons and missile banks opened fire to intercept the incoming torpedoes. The deck shuddered constantly beneath him as the gunnery decks unleashed their broadsides. The reality of it added urgency to his message.

'No, I see that you have not broken your oaths to the Imperium easily, President-General. It must be hard, feeling the pressure of so many lives weighing on every decision you make. The people of Terra Nullius are fortunate to have such a strong leader.'

'*Sarcasm, seneschal?*'

'No, I speak plainly. It is hard, is it not? To sit by and watch those who brought the Imperial Truth to the stars savage themselves for the ambitions and egos of a few. I envy you the luxury of inaction.'

'*I do not understand*,' said Remercus. '*It was your Warmaster that unleashed this terror*.'

'The Warmaster, aye. Great Horus, raised up by the hand of the Emperor himself. How much safer you must feel to hide here from his war, trusting the fate of the galaxy to the efforts of others.'

Remercus's reply was lost in static as the void shields flared. The *Wrath's Descent* shook under a series of impacts, forcing Corswain to steady himself with a hand upon the communications monitor. Klaxons

blared again, signalling emergency crews to their stations.

'Chapter Master Belath, make your report.'

'*Light damage only, seneschal. The* Crusader *has not fared so well – the strike cruiser took the full brunt of the salvo. Her shields are down, and she's suffered several hull breaches*.'

'Have the *Crusader* lay into closer orbit, and reform the line.'

'*Let us turn and respond with our own torpedoes! We will redirect their attack*.'

'I have no intention of redirecting the attack, Chapter Master. If we turn, we will move out from the cover of the batteries, as I told you.'

'*The protection of silent batteries is worthless!*'

'Have faith, Belath.'

'*Faith? In what?*'

'If not in my skills of persuasion, which I understand might be lacking, have faith in common humanity.'

'*It is common humanity that is sitting by while we come under attack. Even before they turned from the Emperor, these Free Army cowards were more burden than boon.*'

Corswain shook his head. 'If you truly believe that, Chapter Master, then they would be right to leave us to settle our own conflict.'

'*Apologies, I spoke out of turn.*' Belath did not speak for several seconds though the link remained open. Then the Chapter Master growled with consternation. '*Their flagship is adjusting course to come alongside, seneschal. Signal identifiers confirm – it's the damnable* Terminus Est.*'*

This pronouncement, though expected, gave Corswain pause to doubt his choice of strategy. Not only was Typhon fully capable of daring the orbital defences if he sensed weakness, his battle-barge was one of the largest ever built, outgunning the *Wrath's Descent* by many decks.

'For good or ill, I have chosen our course and now we must see it through to the end. There is nothing to be gained by questioning ourselves. Recall attack craft to the landing bays, and have all repair crews standing by. I expect we will be suffering the full might of the enemy broadside shortly, as a precursor to boarding.'

'*You sound very calm at the prospect, seneschal*.'

It was true. Corswain felt no apprehension or excitement. His mind had been whirling, but now, faced with such grim inevitability, his thoughts had assumed a laser-like focus. He wondered if this was how the Lion's brain worked all of the time.

'I will not allow this ship to be boarded, Belath. If the enemy attempt to close, we will manoeuvre to counter-board. You and I will lead the attack.'

'*As you command, seneschal*,' replied Belath with, perhaps for the first time since the Death Guard had been sighted, something approaching conviction. '*I will spearhead the fore party, unless you wish that honour.*'

'Aft assault will suit me fine, Chapter Master.'

Before he left his chamber, Corswain picked up the remote terminal for the communicator and plugged it in to his power armour's systems. He was four levels down, the corridors ringing with the thud of armoured boots as the Dark Angels mustered for the boarding action, when the link chimed to signal connection had been re-established with Argeus. Corswain spoke as he marched towards the portside sternwards mustering hall.

'I am surprised you have anything further to say, President-General. You have made your position and reasoning quite clear, and I'll warrant that no debate will change it.'

Corswain nodded in response to the salutes of his honour guard as they greeted him in the arming

chamber. Several hundred legionaries were equipping themselves with specialised boarding gear: power halberds and combat shields for close-quarters fighting; breaching rounds and melta-charges for bulkhead destruction; gravity nets and chain-rasps for void actions.

'*What did you mean, that others would decide the fate of the galaxy?*' Remercus sounded more hesitant than before. '*Do you not believe that Horus's rebellion will be crushed?*'

'I am not an optimist, President-General. The Arch-traitor has maintained the upper hand since the outset. I draw comfort from the fact that I will not likely live to see his victory, though I hope that my death may prevent it.'

'*I would not expect such defeatism from a commander of the Legiones Astartes*.' The President-General's voice seemed even more uncertain. '*Why speak of death?*'

Corswain laughed, with genuine humour.

'I am preparing to board a vessel that doubtless is manned by a superior force, in the hope that I will at least slay its master, the traitor Typhon. Beyond that, I do not expect a single Dark Angels legionary to survive the coming encounter. It is my hope that the Death Guard, weakened by our attack, will be unable to press home the assault upon your world and the ships that orbit it.'

'*You cannot know that that is their intent.*'

Corswain drew his sword and twisted the blade left and right to inspect the keen edge for any burrs or nicks. There were none. He knew as much from painstaking maintenance, but the act was reassuring nonetheless.

'If you believe the Death Guard would respect your claims of neutrality, you are a bigger fool even than me. We conquered the galaxy for the Emperor and the Imperial Truth, President-General. Have no illusions – Horus plans to conquer it again in his own name. I hold no regrets over my part in the war. I hope you will have none either.'

A dull rumble sounded along the battle-barge as it began a rolling broadside, prow to stern, growing louder and louder. It reverberated across the muster hall as the batteries in the deck below opened fire, masking Remercus's reply.

Moments later, the return bombardment from the *Terminus Est* smashed into the *Wrath's Descent*. Despite the aegis of the void shields, the battle-barge was rocked by the impact of shells, missiles and plasma. The sheer violence of it almost threw Corswain from his feet.

'Regretfully, I must end my transmission, President-General. Be sure not to let the Death Guard land on your world – I have seen firsthand the misery that will surely follow.'

'*Wait!*' snapped Remercus. '*Wait a moment. Let me think.*'

'There is no more time to think, only time to act. I have already done so. When we first detected the Death Guard we had the opportunity to disengage from orbit, but that would have left your fleet vulnerable. I have moved your transports out of the path of the enemy and lured that foe into range of your orbital cannons. What you choose to do next is entirely on your own conscience.'

'*This is a trick of some kind. You hope to force my hand with this blackmail?*'

'No trick, no blackmail or coercion. I go now to battle in the name of the Emperor, the Lion and the First Legion. I count myself fortunate to do so, for if the Imperium prevails then our memory and sacrifice will be honoured.'

The huge gateways connecting the muster chamber to the launch bays opened, grinding apart on heavy rollers to reveal Thunderhawks and Stormbirds ready for launch. Corswain lifted his fist in signal to the Space Marines around him, but his words were lost as another salvo of fire crashed into the battle-barge. Bulkheads and braces overhead screeched and groaned from the punishment, but held firm.

Corswain steadied himself. 'In two minutes my attack craft will be en route to the enemy, and your fire

will hit us as likely as them.'

'*Then what would you have me do?*'

'President-General – fire your damn guns now!'

Corswain pulled the remote transmitter from its socket and tossed it to the deck. 'Belath, what is your status?' he asked over the internal vox.

'*Preparing to embark in thirty seconds. Pilots have been briefed with attack patterns. The fleet is reforming for the counter-attack.*'

'See you aboard the *Terminus Est,* brother. Death to the enemies of the Emperor.'

'*Aye. Death to them!*'

Corswain was the last up the ramp of the Stormbird, his honour guard already secure in their harnesses. He made his way past them and took a seat in the specially fitted command cupola beside the cockpit.

'All attack craft, prepare for launch on my command.'

The throb of the gunship's engines increased in pitch as the pilot disengaged the docking anchors. Corswain was about to issue the launch signal when his vox-link chimed with an urgent incoming message. It was Urizel.

'*Seneschal, the defence platforms are opening fire!*' The sensorium captain laughed. '*They're targeting the Death Guard ships!*'

Corswain absorbed this news without reaction, not sure that it came in time. He sat still for a moment, eyes closed. 'And the enemy? What are they doing?'

'Moving away, seneschal. The Death Guard are breaking off their attack.'

Letting out a long breath, Corswain opened his eyes. He wanted to press the advantage while it was with him, but he knew that away from the orbital defences the Death Guard were more than the match of his ships. The Free Army vessels were too far away to intervene in any meaningful way.

'Signal the fleet. Withhold pursuit.' It pained him to say the words but he could not afford to sacrifice more of his brothers. Extended hostilities with the Night Lords had taken their toll, and with twenty thousand legionaries departed along with the Lion, the Dark Angels were a much lesser force than they had been three years earlier. 'Maintain stations. Stand down the launch.'

Belath's whole demeanour was contrite as he entered the chamber at Corswain's call. The Chapter Master kept his gaze lowered, hands clasped at his waist.

'I offer my sincerest apologies for my dissent, seneschal. It was disrespectful and unworthy.'

'It was,' agreed Corswain, folding his arms. His chair creaked as he leaned back. 'I am not the Lion. I cannot be the leader he is. Yet I do demand that my command is respected. I am the Primarch's Seneschal – his will and his voice. Do I make myself clear?'

'Absolutely, seneschal.' Belath bowed and then finally met Corswain's gaze. The Chapter Master smiled. 'You proved yourself worthy of the Lion's choice with the way you dealt with this encounter. I must confess, I thought for a time that your strategy of persuasion had failed.'

'I was convinced it had, too,' said Corswain.

Belath's expression was a picture of shock. 'You mean that you truly intended to board the *Terminus Est*? It was not just a ploy to force the dissidents into allying with us?'

'I sought to deceive nobody. My intent was as I commanded it.'

'I know that the primarch ordered that we engage the enemy at every turn, but were you really prepared to sacrifice us all for those damned separatists?' Belath became more incredulous. 'I admire your noble purpose, brother, but that stretches honour to breaking.'

'The Free Army can rot here alone, for all I care,' said Corswain. 'They are as bad as the traitors, and

we cannot waste our resources on them. I didn't stay for the people of Argeus – I stayed for their transports and gunboats.'

The Chapter Master's expression conveyed his confusion better than any question.

'We need to regain our strength, Belath. We need more warriors.'

'Not the Free Army? Three hundred thousand soldiers is no small force.'

'Nothing compared to another twenty thousand legionaries.' Corswain enjoyed Belath's confused expression. 'You will commandeer the transports, under my authority, while I return to the Legion to continue the hunt for the Wolf.'

'And fill them how?' Belath unclasped his hands and spread them, showing empty palms. 'Where do you expect to find so many Space Marines armed and ready for war?'

Corswain smiled.

'Where they have been waiting for us for many years, Belath. On Caliban.'

THE HARROWING

Rob Sanders

Let it be shown that at elapsid/nullus-beta, Dartarion Varix of the First Hort, Third Harrow and strike commander of the Alpha Legion, allowed his hearts once again to beat to the rhythm of war. Operative-unit 55/Phi-silon observes mission subsequence initiations, while maintaining full noospheric and haptic integration.

Gamma, delta, epsilon… commence.

New target: Mechanicum super-heavy ark freighter *Omnissiax*, registered out of the Heliodyne shipyards with charters for forge worlds on the Dextura shipping lanes. At the time of action-initiation, the *Omnissiax* is under the command of Arkmaster Manus Cruciam, with Magos Dominus Oronti Praeda assigned to security measures and Collegium-Mandati Jerulian Hax responsible for temple-freight transportation and ritual observance. Deific-cargo inspected at Heliodyne and logged as Titan Battle Group Astramax of the Legio Perennia, fresh from inception at the Gallileon temple-forge, Bronta-Median.

Worlds sundered in the name of the Machine-God: none.

Battlegroup confirmed kills: none.

Ranking Princeps Majoris Alvar Pallidon of the Warmonger-class Titan *Abyssus Edax*. Tribute destination recorded at Bronta-Median as the Solar System. Manifests list Ordo Reductor siege machines, two hundred battle tanks and armoured transports of various signification ready for force allocation, as well as five hundred suits of Mark IV Legiones Astartes battleplate, intended for the VII Legion. Newly-appointed Fabricator General Kane to personally receive cargo at Terra. Wayfarage estimated at two solar months.

Transit interrupted twenty-two days into voyage after reception of new orders and subroutines from Gaius Trasq, Fabricator Ancillaris – the *Omnissiax* and Mechanicum light cruiser escort *Dentilicon* ordered to break warp at the Gnostica System and report to the garrison world of Callistra Mundi.

I patrol the vaulted cargo-chamber of one of the ark freighter's many sub-holds. My true name is long forgotten, but my designation is 55/Phi-silon. I am *sparatoi*, a 'sown man' and agent operative of the Alpha Legion. I adjust my disguise: ocular-mask, tattered cloak, battery-pack and las-lock rifle. I present as a Mechanicum tech-thrall, one of thousands throughout the vast ship, assigned to onboard security and the mind numbing patrol of the vessel's holds.

My enhancements are real. My disguise. My sacrifice. My mind, however, is still my own. The Alpha Legion needs agents who can think for themselves. I was thrall to the XX Legion long before I went under the bladesaws of augurnauts and surgeo-cyberseers, volunteering for the adaptive surgeries that would make my disguise complete.

I kneel before the artistry and craftsmanship of Legiones Astartes battleplate. Rows and rows of paintless suits. Their systems await designation and the honour of Legion colours. They are blisteringly

new. Spread throughout their number are suits that still sport their tarps from quality-control and sample testing at Bronta-Median. The fabric flaps in the perverse air currents that afflict a vessel of the ark freighter's size.

The army of empty suits is indeed a wonder. A blessed expression of the Omnissiah's divine will. To an observer, however, such reverence might appear odd or misplaced in a wretched thrall, which is why I phased the auspex and lonely pict-feed lenses monitoring the deck before re-routing the servitors scheduled to inventory the sub-hold.

'Report,' Dartarion Varix orders.

Like the fifty Alpha Legionnaires of his veteran demi-hort, he is hidden. They are all living weapons, concealed and deadly. Like the fang retracted within the serpent's jaws, they are primed with death, ready to be revealed, waiting for the moment to strike.

That moment is now. One of the tarp-draped suits of powered plate moves.

Then another. Then another.

Not all of the suits are empty. Now that their strike commander has broken dissimulatus, the veteran Alpha Legionnaires of the First Hort, Third Harrow can reveal themselves. Auto-suggestion engages. The implanted sus-an membrane of the legionnaires' trans-human physique responds. Their state of suspended animation breaks. Hearts are allowed to beat once more.

Punctuating the ranks of motionless suits, armoured Alpha Legionnaires begin to move. They tear the tarps from their armoured forms to reveal the indigo blue and cerulean blaze of their plate, the serpentine iconography that coils itself about their power-armoured limbs, and the infernal glow of optics burning to life.

'You have been monitoring, my lord?' this unit asks.

'I have.'

'Then you know that our warp translation is complete.'

'I felt it.'

A legionnaire approaches, almost indistinguishable from his brothers.

'Strike commander.'

'Prime,' Varix acknowledges him. 'Your host is ready?'

'Always, my lord. Permission to secure the sub-hold.'

'Authorised.'

'The *Omnissiax* is passing through a debris field of remnant rock and planetesimals approaching the edge of the Gnostica System,' I report through the modulations of my skull-riveted mask. As I do, the Alpha Legionnaires break formation, spreading out across the sub-hold. Umbra-pattern boltguns and sickle-mags of various ammunitions are handed out from cargo crates, while bulkheads and blast doors are secured.

'Is the system contested?'

'Planet-wide mutiny on Callistra Mundi, the primary world of the system,' I continue. 'Imperial auxilia garrison world and fleet anchorage.'

'Who leads the rebellion in the Warmaster's name?'

'You're not going to like it.'

'My primarch's objectives have been compromised and my mission parameters expanded beyond the remit of the forces at my disposal. What is there to like?'

'Long-range voxmissions and noospherics betray encrypted legionary signatures.'

'Alpha Legion,' Varix confirms.

The strike commander takes this revelation in his stride. Even to my cogitator-afflicted brain, this is a

surprise. Have the heads of the hydra become tangled?

'Perhaps they too are beyond their mission parameters,' I offer, but Varix has moved on.

'No,' he says. 'This is something else. Status?'

'It's a mess,' I admit, 'and perhaps as their commander intended. Forces on the ground, in the air and in the void are declaring for the Emperor or the Warmaster.'

'The Legion?'

'No sightings or pict captures reported,' I tell him. 'The Alpha Legion on Callistra Mundi have yet to reveal themselves.'

'They will,' Varix assures me. 'The *Omnissiax…'*

'Has been re-routed to deploy its god-machines,' I inform the strike commander. 'The battle group is to crush the rebellion.'

'Well we can't have that,' Varix says. His words are laced with a dark humour. 'We have to at least give my brother-commander a chance. He's barely begun.'

'Forgive me, lord,' I venture, 'But I am more concerned with our own disposition. The *Omnissiax* will be met and intercepted. Both traitors and loyalists will seek to harness its apocalyptic cargo.'

'Well, quite,' the strike commander says. He is already several steps ahead of me. 'Is the *Dentilicon* still with us?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Prime,' Varix calls.

The Alpha Legion officer acknowledges his commander: 'Ready, my lord.'

'This cargo will never reach the Solar System as planned,' Varix tells us both. 'We shall not arrive at Terra, but need is great out here. The battle group will undoubtedly be sucked into the conflict. I'm authorising secondary objectives and initiating proprietary action *pseudaspis* from a range of forty-four tactically antiphonus responses.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'I'm enacting these contingent protocols and pursuing secondary objectives under my own recognisance. These supersede my primarch's orders. I don't need your concordance, but for the identic record I want it.'

'Pseudaspis, aye,' the prime agrees.

I nod also. 'The *Omnissiax* carries a considerable force escort, my lord. We are not outfitted for this.' Dartarion Varix nods his helm slowly. 'Plus, loyalist forces have a void presence throughout the system. At least nine cruisers and assorted escorts.'

'Duly noted, but that will not stop us. The order is given. The ark freighter is to be taken. Activate our agents. All legionnaires are authorised to enact kill-shot protocols. The Mechanicum is our enemy. We shall explain that fact to them with overwhelming force. In one hour, I want the *Dentilicon* neutralised and both the *Omnissiax* and her payload in the Alpha Legion's hands. No one must ever know we were here. There can be no Mechanicum survivors. Is that understood?'

'Yes, my lord,' I reply.

His lieutenant salutes. 'It will be done.'

'Then let us begin.'

There are few who have experienced an Alpha Legion assault and have lived to report it. The XX Legion does not leave witnesses in its wake without good reason. A devastating combination of imagination, flawless coordination and calculated cruelty are the hallmarks of their particular brand of warfare. They dissemble. They disorientate. Then, with their foe's resources and nerve stretched to breaking, they

initiate a final attack so overwhelming in sheer force and tactical relentlessness, that their enemies' efforts to resist collapse like a dying star.

Warfare becomes annihilation. Battle becomes slaughter. Like an algebraic equation that has to be resolved, the Alpha Legion end their opponents to the last man, unless they conceive of some nefarious usefulness for those at their cold mercy.

For the captured, these are often fates worse than a battlefield death.

At elapsid/rho-nu-alpha, for the Arkmaster Manus Cruciam and his Mechanicum forces, the assault begins. By tapping into the ship's noospheric conduits, this unit deduces that sanctioned scribe Quorvon Krish has just completed echo-plasmic transcription of the astropath Herontius Vame's latest message from the Fabricator Ancillaris when he feels the excruciating stab of pain in his jaw. As one of Dartarion Varix's sparatoi agents, Quorvon Krish has suffered an implant in his tooth that receives signals and transmissions in code. Utilising primitive electromagnetic spectrums that have not been employed by the Mechanicum in thousands of years, the transmissions are unlikely to be traced or intercepted. Each jolt of electricity through the bone corresponds to letters of a coded alphabet, in terms of length and sequence. It is an effective, if agonising, method of coordinating Alpha Legion forces already in situ on board the *Omnissiax*. This allows for the flexibility required of an Alpha Legion action.

D-R-O-P T-H-E C-U-R-T-A-I-N

Elapsid/sigma-lambda-digamma observes Quorvon Kitrica pull a snub autopistol from his robes, attach a suppressor and riddle Herontius Vame with ragged holes. It must feel good. Kitrica might allow himself that. He is twice the telepath that the truculent Vame was or ever would be. Lady Gandrella – who is little better – is also met with the staccato of thudding shots, as is Tech-Acolyte Hadreon as he returns from work on the visual logs, and sanctioned scribes Ransistron and Ezrail.

B-R-I-N-G T-H-E S-I-L-E-N-C-E

At exactly the same time, Transmechanic Nedicto Orx receives his activation and orders. He strangles his locum with the shaft of a coghammer, and then brains his team of transmat servitors. By elapsid/sigma-pi-epsilon, the ark freighter's long range communications array has been plasma-fused, and the vox-relay is a coghammer-mangled mess.

In the following five elapsids, the *Omnissiax* suffers a series of catastrophes the like of which its operational history has not known in a thousand years of service.

Radiation leaks erupt on deck four and sub-decks five through eight. Reserve coolant chambers for the ark freighter's plasma drive are evacuated, cold-flooding parts of the engineering section and initiating a sequence of further malfunctions. For a moment the torsion coils, cooling after warp translation, register a Geller field spike so profound that the magos empyr initiates a code-vermillion shutdown of all associated systems and sections. An electromagnetic pulse in the open-core ionisation cell stack causes sporadic power and vox transmission loss throughout the ark freighter, while artificial gravity experiences an unexplained calibration flux and continues to do so, reducing or intensifying agency by as much as twenty-five per cent in different parts of the vessel. Several exterior voidlocks, situated both port and starboard, are blown, transforming access ways and chambers from a howling maelstrom to a labyrinth of closed emergency bulkheads. Rune banks relay false probabilities, indicating that the hull breach was likely caused by the *Omnissiax* passing through a particle storm, probably the tail-wake of a traversing comet.

By elapsid/tau-xi-alpha, the priests, enginseers and auto-savants rushing about the vessel are officially overreached by the myriad calamities now afflicting their ship.

Logista Minora Auxabel is not one of them. She is doing exactly what she is supposed to be doing under the circumstances – rapidly assimilating the data-storm from her cipher engines and drawing logical

conclusions. At elapsid/tau-xi-theta, she transmits her assessment to Arkmaster Manus Cruciam and Magos Dominus Oronti Praeda.

Conclusion: the *Omnissiax* is under attack.

In such circumstances, overall command reverts to the magos dominus. There isn't even need of a discussion.

In all likelihood the target of the attack is deemed to be the ark freighter's precious cargo, rather than the ark freighter itself, rendering Manus Cruciam's authority superfluous to command priorities. The arkmaster takes his place with Logista Auxubel. Their duty is to get the *Omnissiax* fully functional, as soon as possible. With the vox transmission and noospherics of all security thralls, gun servitors and roaming servo-skulls patched through the communications of Oronti Praeda's ward force, the enemy's movements are then fed straight back to the Alpha Legion through their planted sparatoi agents.

Agents like this unit, 55/Phi-silon.

As the strike commander predicts, the magos dominus does not waste time in following his own protocols and taking precautionary measures. Ordnamats are scrambled to the weapons short-decks, and the ark freighter's meagre complement of defensive cannonry is charged and run out. Security on the bridge is tripled, and the ward force of Collegia temple-thralls, Thallaxii shock troops, Legio Cybernetica battle automata and tech-guard of the Seventh Cell-Sentinel Entropriad are directed with all despatch to the payload sections and the cargo bays. Seeing that they are led by the veteran skitarii Arch-Tribune Dynamus Koda and funnelled through the accessible sections and passageways, Dartarion Varix sends his Alpha Legionnaires to meet them.

Elapsid/omega-xi-zeta sees the first official exchange of gunfire between the Legiones Astartes aboard the *Omnissiax* and loyal Mechanicum forces. Psi-Sigma IV-of-XI loses his artificially augmented life to Legionnaire Phasal Scolton of the First Hort, Third Harrow. As a living auspex, Psi-Sigma IV-of-XI had been leading advance skitarii squads of the Seventh Cell-Sentinel Entropriad through the crew domiciles. Scolton had ordered flamers used on the quarters before having his legionaries withdraw. As the Mechanicum ward force advances, the intense heat and the flames renders main auspex frequencies useless. The Alpha Legion withdraw within the inferno, their battleplate offering more protection against the flames than their enemies can expect.

Slowly, calmly, Legionnaire Scolton leans around the passageway apex and brings his boltgun level with Psi-Sigma's hooded, optic-bulbous head. By the time the construct is ready to confirm a lifesign, Scoltan's finger is on the trigger.

The blast of bolt-fire cuts straight through the living auspex, before chewing up the Entropriad skitarii behind who shield their vulnerable organics from the flames. The Alpha Legion weave their way confidently through the domiciles in alternating columns, slamming their pauldrons into cover whilst watching over their opposite numbers as they advance. The choreographed tactical advance is a thing of serpentine beauty. Phased plasma fire and las-beams slice through the flames from the disciplined ranks of skitarii, but the Legion will not be denied. Their advance is murderously economical. Every blinding lick of flame and every obstructive piece of cover is their ally.

The Entropriad, undoubtedly veterans in their own class, do the only thing an enemy of the Alpha Legion can do.

They die.

By elapsid/khi-nullus-delta, Arch-Tribune Dynamus Koda has watched enough lifesigns fade on his intracranial display that he orders the Castallax battle automata of the 13th Maniple Proxim/Mephistra Cohort into the flames.

Several decks below and running parallel to the Phasal Scolton's advance, Dartarion Varix and a squad of the veteran-hort legionnaires wade through coolant on the flooded sub-decks. I am with them. The syrupy darkness of the fluid cascades down through the levels as maintenance floor-hatch after maintenance floor-hatch is pops, and the Alpha Legion make their way down through the ship.

There are encounters. Servo-drones hurtle up corridors, filling sections with flashing lamps and the wail of klaxons. Groups of gun-servitors march their way past with cybernetic indifference, all unsightly with enhancement and baggy flesh. While canopy formations are maintained and boltguns aimed, Varix has his legionnaires retract behind cover or sink back into the shadows. All constructs on board the Mechanicum vessel will die – the strike commander has so ordered – but the Alpha Legion are not given to moments of rash opportunism. The unplanned end of one enemy might put at risk the meticulously arranged end of a thousand more. There is no glory in the individual death, only the communal honour of a victorious action executed to perfection.

Once down in the bowels of the ship, the ancient sludge of the bilge smearing their armoured boots, I lead my Alpha Legion masters to what on bank schemata is labelled as the fore-keel trunk distribution nexus. On a diagram grid it is nothing more than a 90/120 peta-watt power drain associated with a malfunctioning flush drive that was 4,263rd of 16,457 in a rolling programme of maintenance repairs, and scheduled to be addressed post-voyage. Standing before it in the frosted sludge, with methalon gas drifting through their number like a moorland mist, the Alpha Legion find what they are looking for.

A jury-rigged iso-store of ten cryopods. A team of sparatoi agents that they have sown deep within the ship. I get to work immediately, initiating a rapid thaw. There is no standing on ceremony. Varix and his legionnaires also pitch in, disconnecting pipes and cables, bringing their very own Titan crew back from the brink of semi-death.

'How long?' Varix demands.

'Once out of containment,' I tell him, 'Princeps Darrieux and his crew are scheduled to have two hours with *Abyssus Edax* for core cycles, interfacing and spiritual observance.'

'How long to simply jack the god-machine?' the strike commander puts to me.

'What do you need, my lord?'

'Automotive function and weapons systems only,' Varix insists.

'Forty-five…' The dead-eyed optics of the strike commander's helm turn on me. I hastily revise my estimate. 'Twenty minutes, my lord.'

'Time elapsed since mission start?'

'Elapsid/khi-rho-iota-epsilon,' a legionnaire tells him.

With the thaw cycle initiated, Varix and his veteran-hort begin to exit the chamber and push on through the ark freighter bilge.

'Explain to Princeps Darrieux the new constraints of our situation,' Varix tells me. 'As per his original orders, he is to bring his crew up through the forge-temple sump ducts. My legionnaires will engage the temple guard and give him the distraction he needs to get to the Titan. I want *Abyssus Edax* operational and ready to enact firing sequences in twenty minutes. Understood?'

'Yes, strike commander.'

'When all this is done, bring me the telepath Quorvon Krish.'

With that, Dartarion Varix is gone.

Elapsid/khi-tau-kappa-delta. The *Omnissiax* is in a state of controlled chaos. Though neither the legionnaires of the XX nor the constructs of the Mechanicum are given to such descriptions, it remains an undeniable fact that the ark freighter is suffering a cascade of malfunctions while being ripped apart from the inside by firefights and explosions moving through the decks.

For Magos Dominus Oronti Praeda and Logista Minora Auxabel the surprise attack is a sudden influx of new data to be addressed within a cold and ongoing assessment. For Strike Commander Dartarion Varix it is satisfaction denied: the promise of victory in every boom and scream. It is the clunk-click perfection of a chambered round, the slick mechanical unity of all parts working together and acting as one. Death premeditated. The sickening realisation of the target in sight. The disorientation of the muzzle's thunderous announcement. The shock. The pain. The rich futility of the moment in which an enemy knows that they are done. Then, the neatness and artistry of death. Only then does the killing come to an end and the Alpha Legion allow themselves the cool pride – and perhaps even *pleasure*? – of reporting a mission accomplished.

And so the relentless havoc unfolds. I have sent the Titan crew on with their orders. The telepath Quorvon Krish is by my side. Together we report to our strike commander.

At elapsid/khi-upsilon, tech-adepts of the 13th Maniple Proxim/Mephistra Cohort report unacceptable losses in the crew domiciles. Later analysis would attribute these losses to a winning combination of Banestrike ammunition, shredding its way through the automata plate and workings, and expert marksmanship. In particular, kill-shots targeted the constructs' crania-canopy and the vulnerable neural cortex beneath. Arch-Tribune Dynamus Koda is forced to once again plug the gaps created by fallen Castallax automata with skitarii from the Seventh Cell-Sentinel Entropriad. The situation becomes so dire that the Arch-Tribune himself must take up arms. It has been six years, two hundred and fourteen days and twelve minutes Terran-standard since the skitarii commander has personally fired a cybernetic attachment.

He does not receive the honour of doing it again.

Legionnaire Phasal Scolton blows the back of his head out with an economical burst of fire from a concealed position in the dark recesses of a maintenance booth. Skull and fragments of intracranial tech shower the passage. By elapsid/khi-upsilon-kappa-theta, Koda's own auspectral signature is confirmed lost and skitarii sentinel Inx Voltar is cursorily promoted to the rank of sub-tribune. At Magos Dominus Praeda's insistence, Voltar's first recorded act of leadership is to order the Entropriad to withdraw to the forward hold. It is not considered by the sub-tribune to be a decorous act, but he complies with his protocols regardless.

Concurrent with the unstoppable slaughter rolling through the crew domicilia, Logista Minora Auxabel receives a data-confluence of further hostilities. Limited surveillance coverage identifies enemy contingents wearing Mark IV battleplate. Fragmented reports bear witness to rank, insignia and Legion colours. Auxubel calculates for the magos dominus only a thirty-seven point six per cent chance that the enemy belong to the XX Legion. This estimate is based on incomplete capture-testimony, and what little information the Mechanicum runebanks hold on the Legion's operational histories during the recent movements of the Great Crusade. Nonetheless, it is the greatest likelihood at her disposal.

Oronti Praeda demands further enhancement and tactical options but the logista has little to give him. Having fought alongside the Alpha Legion at Cypra Chasmis, the magos dominus knows that the XX favour the long game and calculates that the best chance for the beleaguered *Omnissiax* is to hit the Legiones Astartes with everything they have in one devastating push.

At Praeda's command, any construct with a martial rating of any description is ordered into battle. They are directed to the emerging hostilities near the temple forge section of the forward hold, and to the starboard auxiliary gun decks where enemy targets have been observed entering through malfunctioning voidlocks from outside the ship. They are also directed to the portside flight decks where security thralls are being decimated among the skiffs and freight ambulatories, and to the sub-levels where gun servitors and electro-priests of the Battle Group Astramax-attendant 'Grex Anbarica' hold their ground against

targets emerging from maintenance decks. As the firefight rages several levels below their boots, Praeda considers it prudent to despatch a Thallaxii cohort of cyborg shock troops to crush the rising advance.

'What of our own security?' Arkmaster Manus Cruciam asks across the bridge, his voice clearly audible to me through the noospheric link. It is not an unreasonable question. Beyond auspex-drone weaponry, only deck thralls and Praeda's personal ward engines remain.

'Our security,' the magos dominus tells him, 'nay, our survival, depends upon the *Omnissiax* reaching Callistra Mundi as soon as possible.' Logista Auxubel nods her slow agreement. 'Preoccupy yourself with that, arkmaster.'

Like a ceramite gauntlet, the Alpha Legion have the ark freighter in their grasp. With every bolt-smashed construct and every scoured section, Dartarion Varix tightens his grip. Alpha Legionnaires of the First Hort, Third Harrow weave their way through the expanse of the ark freighter like serpents through the undergrowth. Little stops their advance – not the vessel's souless thralls, not the battle-automata with their lumbering movements and limited protocols and not the battle-hardened skitarii. Elapsid/khi-phi becomes elapsid/khi-omega. Elapsid/khi-omega becomes elapsid/betakhi-rho. With each passing second, Mechanicum constructs die. Some are blasted apart in showers of hydraulic fluid and shattered components, while others simply thud to their knees as Alpha Legionnaires put single bolt-rounds through skulls and central cogitators alike.

Veterans of First Hort, after exiting the vessel and climbing along the exterior hull, now re-enter through blasted voidlocks. As they progress through the side of the ship like a burrowing worm, they open bulkheads before them and evacuate entire sections of Mechanicum warrior-constructs, who are dragged and dashed along the trail of howling corridors that the Alpha Legion left in their wake. For these unfortunate servants of the Omnissiah, only the frozen void beckons.

Gradually, moment by moment, even with staid reports of rapid successes pouring in over the vox-channels, this unit deduces that Dartarion Varix begins to feels denied. He misses the screams. The begging seems strangely absent. The blood-soaked intensity, the futility and the desperation that the Alpha Legion creates in enemy forces is found to be lacking in the cold, calculating servants of the Machine-God. Even as Varix and his legionnaires put bolt-rounds through the dead, oil-black eyes of servitors and the iron masks of tech-thralls, the constructs make no sound but the crash of their augmented bodies on the deck. Bolt-blasted battle automata grind to a statuesque halt, while even the psycho-indoctrinated skitarii merely give a grunt as the air of their last breath escapes their artificial lungs. The strike commander is no fear-hungry Nostroman monster, nor one of Fulgrim's deviant Children. The howls and anguish of the fallen are not a perversity to be savoured. For the Alpha Legion, executing the enemy, their mission directives and their duty with peerless skill, the screams of the dying are simply a professional courtesy.

At elapsid/betakhi-rho-gamma-digamma, Alpha Legionnaire Duceus Ladon dies right next to his strike commander. Thrall soldiers on the stairwell part to admit the Thallaxii – cyborg shock troops, armoured from head to foot in powered plate. The crackling arcs of their lightning guns sear down through the stairwell to cook Ladon right there in his armour. Varix snarls. It is a waste. Ladon was an excellent legionary, and had served with him on his last five actions. Varix hears the heavy clunk of the Thallaxii's ambulatory systems as they lock down their position.

It is the first in a succession of losses for the strike commander.

Elapsid/betakhi-rho-omicron-delta sees Legionnaire Argan reported dead in the forward hold, the victim of a skitarii grenade clutch. Elapsid/betakhi-sigma-mu-theta witnesses the passing of Orman Zalco, torn apart by the vice-claws of a Castallax battle automaton. Seconds later, Squad Sergeant Xantina is gunned down by a ceiling-mounted rotary cannon, its auspectral wetware returning unexpectedly to life as enginseers in some distant part of the ship begin to repair some of the damage done to the ark freighter's

systems.

The Mechanicum are unleashing everything they have in an effort to stop the Legiones Astartes in their tracks. Dartarion Varix expected as much of their commander. Indeed, the he is relying on such a strategic response. Warrior-victims of Alpha Legion assaults were like traditionally tormented, wild beasts – wounded and disoriented, they were most dangerous when they were near their end. Varix allows a thin smile to find its way across his face. Actions speak louder than words. He can suddenly see the suppressed emotion of the Omnissiah's servants in their tactical responses. They are losing their ship and becoming increasingly desperate. They are no longer safe in their data and equations. They entrust their survival to gambles and risks – even if they are calculated ones.

'Armoured targets,' Varix announces over the vox.

Immediately, sickle clips are exchanged in boltguns; Banestrike bolts will make short work of the armoured Thallaxii. In the bloodshot gloom of the stairwell with klaxons blasting and emergency lamps flickering on and off, Varix takes cover as streams of lightning blast down past him. The Thallaxii are not moving.

The cohort's orders are clear: hold the Alpha Legion on the sub-levels. The same is being reported across the *Omnissiax*. Alpha Legionnaires held at choke points and gauntlets. Mechanicum forces are bedding in, establishing heavily defended positions. It would take more than a demi-hort to work their way through such a nightmare, especially upholding the kill ratio that the Alpha Legion had come to expect. Like a regicide player, Varix has always thought little of sacrificing individual pieces as part of a strategy to win the game. This, however, would be wasteful slaughter. The Mechanicum are no longer intent on destroying their attackers. Such a strategy has cost them. They had been caught up in the slick machinery of the Alpha Legion's relentless onslaught. Now their intention seems to be to jam that machinery and hold out for the reinforcements that they are sure to find at Callistra Mundi.

Dartarion Variux cannot allow that. Besides, the assault is about to enter its final stage.

By elapsid/betakhi-upsilon-gamma the decision is made, the order given.

'All legionnaires,' he calls across the encrypted channel, 'call in the location of sighted enemy contingents and then hold your own position.' As the lightning rages about him like the judgement of an angry god, the Alpha Legion strike commander listens to the squads and coordinates coming in. Varix retracts a gauntlet as crackling impact energies reach out for him across the grille of the stairwell. 'Darrieux, tell me you have that.'

He does. The data has been relayed. His voice reaches through the chaos, almost drowned out by the relentless storm of anabaric streams coursing down through the stairwell.

'*Abyssus Edax online*,' I tell him from the command deck of the colossal Warmonger Titan. '*Moderati Tessera has a hololithic fix on received coordinates. Confirm – request for fire support received. Stand by, ten seconds.*'

'Be accurate,' Varix orders. 'Be devastating.'

With bolt blasts and lightning streams exchanged about him, Varix pauses. He undoubtedly enjoys the promise of what is to come, the power of the god-machine at his command. It is elapsid/betakhi-upsilon-xi exactly – the assault about to reach its climax.

Dartarion Varix switches back to the open channel. 'Incoming…'

The Titan opens fire from its berthing clamps and the ship's torment can be felt immediately. The *Omnissiax* trembles with the devastation unleashed within it. The sound is excruciating. Decking. Superstructure. Hull. Metal blasted to shrapnel. Ancient architecture twists and warps before the onslaught. Gaping holes and paths of destruction cut through the ark freighter's interior. Even at a distance, the sound of the god-machine's weaponry is a horrific boom. Through passageways, chambers

and sections, the rhythmic thunder of the Titan's colossal gatling blaster reaches the Alpha Legion. The rate of fire is staggering – literally. The decks shudder beneath their boots. Huge calibre shells rip up through the ship, decimating entire compartments and the Mechanicum constructs holding position within them. Skitarii soldiers, thralls and automata are blasted into oblivion as the wrath of the god-machine chews through the ark freighter.

Around Dartarion Varix, the ship feels like it is dying, like some great, mortally wounded beast.

Then he hears the Titan's quake cannon.

The deck bucks and even the strike commander almost loses his footing. Like a gargantuan gut-punch delivered amidships, the ordnance rockets through the vessel, destroying everything in its path. Again and again it fires, punctuating the almost constant roar of the gatling blaster.

'Boots,' Varix calls as one of the quake cannon shells blasts a path out through the ark freighter's hull. Engaging the mag-lock anchors on their armoured boots, the Alpha Legionnaires hold positions as air, debris and the ragdoll bodies of thralls and servitors howl past them, sucked through the labyrinth of passageways and out into space. Dartarion Varix slams my thrall-form into the wall and anchors me there. Quorvon Krish receives similar treatment.

In the vacuum I can hear nothing. The klaxons are silenced, but the emergency lighting still flashes, bathing us all in a bloody twilight. I can barely imagine the reaction on the bridge, and the data – or the lack of it – that must be greeting the strike commander's Mechanicum opposite. Their great push to meet their enemy head to head and pin them down in gauntlets and bottle necks has rapidly evolved into a catastrophe. While the Alpha Legion contingents hold the safety of their reported positions, *Abyssus Edax* has decimated the Mechanicum forces despatched to hold them in check. Already stretched by the diversionary calamities unleashed by the sparatoi agents and then forced to repel a Legiones Astartes assault from within the very ship they were garrisoning, even the cold constructs of the Machine-God might be tempted to lose their nerve. Perhaps even their faith?

That is not enough. Not for the XX legion. Not for the strike commander.

The hydra's heads must strike in unison. The mission cannot be declared accomplished until a disorientated enemy, hit from all sides simultaneously and bereft of hope, falls to the final bolt-round. As the howling evacuation becomes an eerie silence and the reverberating cacophony of titanic gunfire dies away in the void, Varix nods to a nearby legionnaire who closes the bulkhead behind them.

'Report in,' the strike commander calls.

One by one, legionnaires from across the ark freighter announce themselves. With air pressure re-establishing itself in the sealed section, Varix has one of his warriors check that the Thallaxii holding the stairwell are no more. This is swiftly confirmed. The floors above are a mangled mess of twisted metal and blasted bodies.

The strike commander nods, satisfied. 'All units converge on the command decks,' he voxes before turning to me. Then he makes an unusual request. 'Find me prisoners. There must be something left alive on this wreck.'

Elapsid/betakhi-sampi-koppa-beta. Magos Dominus Oronti Praeda slumps into the command throne of the *Omnissiax*. Constructs stand around him in grim silence. The air is thick with expectation. The loss of so many servants of the Omnissiah and the turning of their own god-machines against them weighs heavily, even upon the more detached Mechanicum priests. But they are not done. Not yet.

'The *Dentilicon*?'

'As predicted, magos,' Logista Minora Auxabel informs him. 'Our sudden vox-silence and hull damage is drawing her to us. Her shipmaster probably assumes we have suffered some sort of accident or

malfunction, and is offering support as a courtesy. We have no way of warning them otherwise. Steps must be taken, magos. Even Arkmaster Cruciam concurs. The *Omnissiax* and her deific cargo cannot be allowed to fall into the Archenemy's hands.'

Praeda's cogitator burns hot with the possibilities.

'So ordered,' he tells them, finally.

The logista nods to Praeda's personal ward engines, who exit the bridge by the command deck elevators. For a while, no construct communicates on the bridge by any means that this unit can monitor.

Rune banks spark and smoke. Deck servitors go about their business with ghoulish obliviousness. Manus Cruciam says nothing. He fastidiously adjusts settings on nearby rune-screens. Collegium-Mandati Jerulian Hax is similarly silent. They are constructs without purpose. Hax's Titan payload is *already* in the hands of the enemy, and the arkmaster now commands a floating wreck. They watch the lancet screens. The *Omnissiax* glides through the thin belt of colossal rubble and debris that encircles the Gnostica System like a belt. In the dull glow of the system's star, Cruciam spots the tiny speck that is the contested world of Callistra Mundi, where Battle Group Astramax were to prove their worth. Instead, the god-machines are tainted with the blood of their loyal Mechanicum creators. He fancies he can see sparks of ship-to-ship combat about the world.

The light frigate *Dentilicon* has made its turn and is returning to the slowing ark freighter it escorts. The light cruiser runs alongside the *Omnissiax* in the hope of offering some kind of support.

At elapsid/gamma-khi-omicron-zeta, the command deck elevator announces its arrival. Deck thralls train their weapons on the opening doors, but it is only a group of horrifically damaged servitors. The constructs limp onto the command deck. They seem confused and agitated. A lexmechanic demands their identifiers.

Their stumbling silence draws the attention of the bridge crew. The lexmechanic approaches. As she does so her optical relays inform her that the servitors have objects wedged between the gleaming white ceramic teeth of their mouths. Her auxiliary cogitator tells her that there is an eighty-two per cent chance that those objects are grenades.

She turns to warn the arkmaster and magos dominus, but she doesn't get the chance. The servitors detonate in unison, tearing up the command deck and blasting the equipment and constructs on bridge with splintered frag.

Magos Dominus Oronti Praeda is knocked from the command throne. As he shakes the functionality back into his cogitator links, he hears the heavy metal thud of armoured enemies dropping down into the elevator carriage from the roof hatch. Space Marines in the colours of the Alpha Legion sweep forward through the smoke, their boltguns aimed and ready. The brief gunfire is precise and economical. Deck thralls that yet live are executed where they stand. Drone weaponry is blasted to uselessness and even Jerulian Hax's armed cherubim escort is put down with a single shot to its angelic head.

Strike Commander Dartarion Varix and the veteran legionnaires of the First Hort, Third Harrow have taken control of the bridge and, by extension, the Mechanicum ark freighter *Omnissiax*. Varix removes his battle-helm to reveal the bronzed skin of his shaven head, the dark disdain of his primarch's echoed features.

'Report.'

Oronti Praeda goes to make a proud retort, but instead Logista Minora Auxabel replies.

'All goes according to plan, my lord,' she tells her strike commander. 'The *Dentilicon* is pulling alongside and sending skiffs across to us.'

'What are you doing?' the magos dominus manages. Cruciam and Hax similarly stare on in disbelief at the logista.

‘But the magos dominus has despatched his ward engines to the engineering section, my lord,’ she continues. ‘Their orders are to detonate the plasma drive and destroy the ship.’

Dartarion Varix nods before raising his eyebrows at Oronti Praeda.

‘Nice try,’ Varix tells the magos dominus. Then to Auxabel, he says, ‘Have Phasal Scolton and his unit divert to intercept the ward engines.’

‘Very good, my lord.’

‘Our defensive capabilities?’ Varix asks with a thin, ironic smile.

‘Port and starboard short-batteries charged and run out as a precautionary measure,’ the logista tells him.

‘Have the bridge inform the masters of gunnery decks that we continue to be under attack. Use the magos dominus’s authorisation codes. The batteries are ordered to fire as they bear.’

‘As you command.’

‘Auxabel…’ Praeda says. He looks from the logista to Quorvon Krish and myself. From my thrall form he moves the disbelief of his optics on to the strike commander. ‘Please, have mercy–’

Varix raises one armoured finger to silence him.

‘There it is,’ Varix says, pointing at the magos dominus’s stricken face.

As the Alpha Legion strike commander and the Mechanicum magos regard one another, the meagre cannonry of the ark freighter fires. It is a ragged salvo, but it serves at point-blank range to blast the shieldless *Dentilicon* into fiery void-scrap.

As shattered sections of the escort fall away, floating before the viewscreens of her larger charge, Dartarion Varix tells Praeda, ‘The desperation. The overwhelming hopelessness. The pleading – perhaps not for your life, tech-priest, but for the lives of others. *There* is proof that our work is its own reward.’

Then the strike commander nods to his warriors, and the bridge flashes briefly with precision gunfire. At elapsid/gamma-khi-sigma-lambda-delta, the enemy commander, Oronti Praeda, dies. As do Manus Cruciam and Jerulian Hax.

Varix turns to Minora Auxabel. ‘So, you got my message.’

The sparatoi agent taps the implant in her tooth by way of a reply.

‘Good work,’ Dartarion Varix tells her. He nods also to me and Quorvon Krish. ‘Logista Auxabel,’ Varix calls, playfully using the agent’s assumed name. ‘Do we have steerage?’

‘Barely, my lord.’

‘Well, use what we have to get the *Omnissiax* system-bound. Has contact been established with the Alpha Legion commander?’

‘Legionary signatures have been traced,’ I inform him. ‘Harrowmaster Armillus Dynat in command.’

‘Armillus Dynat,’ Varix repeats. ‘The uprising?’

‘Spreading to the surrounding moons,’ Auxabel tells him. ‘It’s being reported as a rebellion, but the outbreaks are systematic and betray highly coordinated patterns. The precursor to a planet-wide annihilatory action, I suspect, my lord.’

‘The Legion reveals itself,’ the strike commander confirms. ‘If Armillus Dynat commands from the surface, then he is likely to have three to four battalions of legionnaires at his disposal, plus sparatoi support structures. There are likely more forces en route. Astropath?’

‘Three Alpha Legion heavy cruisers confirmed system inbound,’ Quorvan Krish offers. ‘And the battle-barge *Omicron* emerges from the Byssda-Escona Deeps, carrying further reinforcements.’

Varix nods with approval.

‘Master Krish,’ he tells the astropath, ‘I wish to send a message to Harrowmaster Dynat.’

‘The content, strike commander?’

‘Tell the Harrowmaster that the Mechanicum forces and Titan battle group re-routed to crush the

rebellion on Callistra Mundi have been neutralised. The god-machines and their transport are in Alpha Legion hands. Inform him that his action has forced a deviation from our mission directives, but that secondary objectives have been met with… Elapsid?'

'Elapsid/gamma-khi-sigma-omicron-zeta,' this unit reports.

'With five minutes to spare,' Dartarion Varix finishes. 'The *Omnissiax* is en route to assist him, and my veteran hort wait on his pleasure.'

'We go to Callistra Mundi, my lord?' I ask.

'We do,' Dartarion Varix confirms. 'My brother-commander wishes there to be a Harrowing.'

'My lord,' I acknowledge.

A Harrowing.

It is more than just a word.

My internal data-banks mark it as a signifier. A stratagem.

It is an expression of the XX Legion's art of war. An experience, as both prosecutor and victim. Confusion. Disorder. Betrayal. Panic. Horror. An enemy force chasing phantoms. Our foes at war with themselves. We watch as they expose their vulnerabilities. As they make their way from desperation to annihilation. We bring them to the boil. Then, when they can take no more, as they lie across the altar of our tactical perfection, we sacrifice them to inevitability. A storm of coordinated attacks. Alpha Legionnaires appearing from every corner, from every shadow, from behind the face of every seeming friend and ally, boltguns blazing.

It will be a decimate wonder to behold.

'The Harrowmaster calls on the legionnaires of the Twentieth,' Dartarion Varix tells us, 'for he wishes to murder this world. My brothers, we are to be part of something very special indeed. The Harrowing of Callistra Mundi begins.'

ALL THAT REMAINS

James Swallow

The deck tilted under my feet until I was walking like a crab, one foot on what used to be the floor, the other on what was the starboard-side wall. Gravity had become unusual, and it spread itself in peculiar patterns throughout the ship's corridors.

Some strange artefact of the malfunctions, perhaps? I didn't know enough to tell. It's not where my expertise lies, but I imagined that if I could have seen it, the gravity would pile like drifts of snow blown into odd corners. Snow like we had at home, on Nomeah, before the melts and the ending.

Flicking that thought away, I used the sconces in the walls as hand-holds, taking care to first beat out any flickering electro-candles with the butt of my lasrifle. The others kept pace behind me, and I could hear them all labouring their breaths in the cold, heavy air. I didn't need to turn to see the aura-light around their heads. I knew it would be unchanged: anger-red and terror-black.

Without the ship's internal illumination, the only way we could navigate was by the sullen glow from the chamber at the far end of the corridor. Long shadows reached toward us, inky and fathomless. I felt as if I were some parasitic thing crawling up the throat of a dead host animal, questing for the open, fanged mouth.

The noise of slow-twisting metals surrounded us as the ship was continually stressed and relaxed. I was no void-born, but I had ridden in starships on many occasions and I knew what sounded wrong. I knew the sound of something tested to breaking point. Something that was going to die.

The thought fatigued me and I stopped to rest. I felt heavy and damp, as if I had been dragged through ice water; uniform, war-cloak, pack and all. The lip of a jammed hatch served as a temporary halt, and the others accepted it readily.

Dallos sat closest to me and immediately had his cards out, his spindly pink fingers going over them. He worked the careworn rectangles of plas-paper with the rote deftness of a gambling sharp. The cards glinted, the print across their faces worn away in places where he had dealt and re-dealt them a thousand times. I could make out the faint numerals and the abstract geometric shapes of the suits.

'Four of Emeralds,' he muttered, unaware of himself. 'Two of Hammers.'

Dallos's face was half-hidden under a mask of dirty bandages. A monster had burned him, so I'd learned. The nimbus of a bolt of spewed fire had passed close to his unit, enough to torch the rest of the men in his mortar crew but not enough to kill him. What I could see of Dallos's face was pink like his hands, where he had beat out the backwash flames – as raw as his aura, and just as bright.

Not a one of us was what you could call *able*. I think even the most generous of observers would have considered us to be a sorry collection of souls. Six men, clad in uniforms of the great Imperial Army, a scooping of poor bloody infantry from half a dozen different battalions all across the front line of the insurrection. We were the *canis-facies*, the sons of worlds ground up into chum by the inexorable machine of this new war. I think we all had badges of differing rank and status, but the memory evades. On the ship, it never mattered. No one was in charge, there was no chain of command. We simply were. Any

intentions to salute or to snap to orders seemed pointless. A lot of things seemed pointless after all the horrors we had witnessed.

But so we were. I had lost fingers on my right hand – my off-hand, and so somehow I interpreted that as lucky – and taken shrapnel in my torso and thigh. The pieces were still in me, needles pricking me with each step I took. The small pains made me tired as much as they kept me awake. Dallos, as I said, was the burned man. Breng, with his skin the deep ebon of varnished wood, he showed the puckering and scarification of a gas attack victim. It was agony for him to speak, the poor fool's throat now a ruin, so he communicated as much through tilts of the head and hollow glares as he could. I think LoMund might have been an officer once, back when it mattered. That would explain the long white hair and the regal cut of his face, perhaps. That bit of him was broken, though. He had been belly-cut and spilled on the mud, saved only because blind panic and adrenaline had made him cup his own innards in his hands for long enough to stagger back to a safe zone. Then Chenec and Yao, each sallow of flesh with perpetually hooded eyes, both from the same world and both having been near-killed by claws and stubber fire.

We were a small pack of walking wounded. I had not seen an uninjured man – and we were all men, for there were no females on this vessel – since we had disembarked from the rescue boat that bore me from Nomeah. The closest thing I had come across to the hale and whole were the lobotomised medicae servitors that prowled the ward decks, tending to the injured. If there were actual medics and chirurgeons on board this hulk, then they had not cared to turn their attention to us.

There were so few of us, but what took my pause was that the ship was still full. The holds carried *children*. Refugee boys out of ruined families or from bombed-out scholaria, war orphans by the dozen. Sometimes we heard them crying for their parents, for answers, for anything. It burned me, in a way, to admit that I was as lost as they were.

This was one ship among several, or so I thought. In truth, I hadn't seen a porthole since we jumped into the screaming madness of the warp and fled the perfidy of the whoreson Warmaster. Whether or not the other craft were still out there, I didn't know. A few gunboats protecting bulk carriers packed to the gunwales with injured, our pathetic little convoy stopped here and there to pick up other contingents of the similarly injured. I had heard that some of the other vessels carried wounded Space Marines; was such a thing possible, I wondered? It seemed fanciful that any of the Imperium's immortal champions could ever suffer something so mundane as a mere wound.

And so, in time none of us had the first clue as to where we were or to which points of the aetheric compass we were headed. The only constant was the lamentation of the almost-dead echoing through the cavernous wards as they fought nightmares in their sleep. That, and the sound of the engines.

But after a time, I began to notice patterns. That's what I'm good at.

I can *see* things.

I don't speak of it much because it can frighten an unwary soul, and anger others into rash action. People don't like what they cannot understand, and they tend to react with violence over all else. In the ranks of the Imperial Army, that violence can come by blade or las-bolt, so it is conducive to a man's wellbeing not to go looking for it.

The patterns – on ships like this, there's always a mix of the wounded, from those sad cases who would be better given the Emperor's Peace to the ones who are little more than malingerers. Not on this vessel, though. I saw that the injured here were all souls who could, if care were given, make it back to the front lines. In all the passage through the ship's labyrinthine interiors, I had not come upon one that could not have been healed to fight another day. Those more needy or less likely to survive had been transferred off when we docked or made rendezvous with other medicae ships in deep space. The ones who replaced them had faces of familiar cast.

You could see it in the eyes. Dallos and LoMund and the others here, every man we met along the way – I saw that same look staring back at me from the mirror. Not just the thousand-yard stare of a soldier, not just that. A shared burden that none of us could talk about, because we had all spent our lives denying it. Hiding it.

'S-Six of Crosses,' Dallos stuttered, working the cards into a blur of movement. 'Ace. The Ace of D-daggers. The other ships are gone.'

We had been climbing for the better part of a day, up from the amidships levels where the radiation shielding was heavy and immovable, locking us in. The lower decks, the engineering spaces, weren't connected to the wards, and there seemed little reason to seek a way to reach them. We numbered few and those of us who were mechanically savvy were far from enginseers. Breng was the closest thing we had to a technologian, being a ship hand and pilot-savant.

It seemed more logical to head up, to find the flying bridge and command tiers. At first I insisted that we look to the youths in the other compartments, perhaps to lend them some courage… but there seemed little point to that. We had none to spare.

Recall that I spoke before of the constants of sound, the moaning and the engines; I had woken the day before from a fitful sleep full of dream-colours, to a reality of cold silence from the warp motors. Without explanation, we were suddenly adrift. Malfunctions came soon after. Power gave out in sudden falls of darkness and creeping waves of hoarfrost. Air fouled and became still. Worse were the doors that fell like great blades guillotining down across the corridors, sealing off sections of the ship without warning.

There had been nothing to suggest collision or impact by enemy weapons. After a few hours, when we were still alive and the corridors were not crawling with blood-hungry xenos, murderous traitors or… the *other* things, we drew plans to investigate.

I saw patterns, but I hadn't seen any sign of this one forming. That's why I volunteered – that and the fact that I could hold a gun. The few that we had liberated from an emergency armoury, we clutched to us like talismans of protection. If the new enemy was out there, of course, I wondered how much use the guns would be to us. At best, they were a comforting illusion of strength.

I remembered the streets of Nomeah running red. I remembered the giants slaughtering all who dared to stand or who did not flee fast enough. I remembered the horrors, but only as blurs of meat and talons and blood, as if my mind had smudged out the memory of them rather than know it with any clarity.

I looked down at the hand with the missing fingers, and the echo of stark pain was there, cold and quick.

'Hecane?' Yao was the one who eventually spoke. 'We move on?' He gestured towards the dim light ahead, asking the question of me, of all of us.

I nodded. 'We move on.'

I know what kind of war this is.

I've fought on a dozen worlds in the Akarli Cluster and far beyond, on deserts and in oceans, through cloud-reaches and mountain passes, but Nomeah was my home. We always seemed to come back to there. A rough rabble of people we had been called, and that was right. Constantly infighting, each of our tribes nurturing grudges against the others like they were our offspring.

What can you say of the Nomeahi? That we know how to hate. That we can find an insult in a bouquet of roses. Those things are true. But it is also true that we love our Emperor and we are proud of our Imperium. Perhaps that is why our petty little differences were tolerated by the bureaucrats of Terra – they let us bloody each other in our small rivalries because they knew that when the call came, we would pick up arms and march side by side without hesitation. All enmities forgotten for the moment, in the Emperor's name. Our contentious nature makes us good warrior stock. I'll point you to a dozen planets

brought hard into compliance by regiments born of worlds in the Akarli sector. We did our part for the Great Crusade, that was never in question.

Of course, in recent times, we started to trickle home and fight amongst ourselves once again, but never enough to make it an issue beyond our own borders. But then the change came, the rebellion, the insurrection – the *heresy*, as some of the more histrionic called it. Many didn't understand at first, and then they were dead. But I understood. I find patterns. I know betrayal when I see it.

It runs like lifeblood through the veins of this war. It is what powers the will of the traitors, and the men who foolishly think that they can ride the edges of the bastard Horus's cloak. This war is not being fought for desire of power. It is not a just revolution against the yoke of an oppressor. Materiel and territory? Those are objectives of passing interest. No, what we face here is treachery for treachery's sake. I think I knew that from the first, but it is only now that I have the words to express the thought. Now that I have had the time to think on it.

Horus, may he die a thousand deaths, is the very definition of *traitor*. The purest evolution of that idea made manifest. He's a son hating the father, a citizen betraying his state, a patriot burning his flag, a commander killing his soldiers. For all his gene-engineered origins, Horus is a human sacrificing humanity. He is the worst of us.

I know this, not because I have seen the Warmaster, or spoken to him or anything like that; I know it because I have seen with these eyes the horrors that he has called to battle in his name.

And fate take me, in my dreams I have stood upon the edge of the crumbling abyss that he seeks to plunge us into.

It was perhaps a day later when we finally made it to the command tiers. Many corridors up there were sealed by those thick drop-doors, and the ones with glassy portals allowed me to look through and see vacuum-bloated corpses in the compartments beyond, drifting in null-gravity. More life support failures, more unlucky dead, young and old alike.

'Didn't live this long to be killed by bloody machines failing,' Chenec grated. 'Not burning my luck now!' He fingered a chain habitually worn around his wrist, a line of metal beads dull with age. I think he could hear something in the way they rattled, but if that were so, Chenec never sought to talk about it.

I was going to answer him, but then I saw LoMund and Breng bringing up their guns. A heartbeat later, footsteps were coming toward us.

I listened. You learn quick when the horrors are abroad. You learn how to hear for talons scraping and bones dragging. This was just the clatter of boots on metal plates, but I wasn't about to be casual. I've seen things that will look like men to your eyes, but with auras belonging to monsters that only the insane could imagine.

A youth stumbled around the corner and we nearly shot him for his temerity. He saw us and almost fouled his britches in shock. 'Don't shoot!' he cried. The boy was barely a teenager, shaven-headed and dirty.

'Who the blades are you?' demanded LoMund, pointing with his laspistol. 'Talk!'

He did, collapsing and babbling all at once. He told us his name was Zartine, a foundling boy from a city orphanage on Zofor's World, bold enough to slip out of the lower wards to explore the ship and now regretting it. He was utterly terrified, and not just of us. I could see his colours flashing orange, out of control.

I helped him up. 'Calm down, lad. What are you doing up here? Do you know what happened to the ship?'

'I know!' Zartine snapped back. 'It's worse than you think. They're here, don't you see? Can't you hear them?' He waved at the air, hands clutching at nothing. 'Space Marines!'

Breng made a noise like he was hawking up phlegm. 'No legionaries here.'

'Wrong!' shouted the youth. He pointed over his shoulder. 'Down there. *Saw him*.'

'He isn't lying.' It was a second before I realised that it was Dallos who had spoken. I turned and found him with the damned deck in his hands again, his rifle stowed.

'Eight of Hammers.'

He held up the worn card to show us all, as if it were a warrant of absolute truth.

All of a sudden, I was incensed at his moronic little game, and I crossed the distance to Dallos in a rush, slapping the cards out of his grip with a savage backhand. 'You don't know!' I snarled, fighting back a surge of panic. 'You can't know that!' Dread coiled inside me, icy and thick.

Dallos wailed and immediately dived at the deck, snatching up the cards where they had scattered. He seemed so hurt by my action. My anger was strangled and guilt washed over me. Guilt and fear.

Let me tell you how it happened on Nomeah. Let me show you the little war of my life, the microcosm of the greater treachery that even now writhes across the stars, writing itself into our history.

You would think that because of who we were, the conflict would have come in blood and thunder from the outset. Man against man, neighbours fighting neighbours. Well, all that did come, but not at first. The start of it was insidious, and for that I hate Horus all the more. He didn't come to our worlds with warships and guns; he didn't even consider us worthy of those things. Nomeah and the worlds of Arkarli were set upon the path to dissolution and ruin by a handful of perfidious agents, less than a platoon's worth. Fifth columnists, interlopers and sneaks who turned us against ourselves.

We gave them fertile ground, idiots that we were. A web of old jealousies, lines of distrust that were ripe for exploitation. Where the Emperor's light of illumination had united us, the Warmaster's shadow divided.

And the cleverness of it was the perfect, fractal nature of the deceit. It scaled up and down, using the same tools to embellish ingrained hatreds between whole worlds, nations, cities. All the way down until it was street against street, house against house, brother against brother. We all hated so very well on Nomeah and, directed by callous hands, that hatred ripped us apart.

But not all at once. It was subtle, *careful*.

I remember with blinding clarity the day when the poison of it bubbled to the surface in my platoon. Note that we were nothing special – just a division of riflemen with no great laurels and banners to carry before us. No impressive name or clever sobriquet. There was a force number attached to our division and nothing else. In the scheme of the Emperor's Great Crusade, we were quite ordinary. But that was not enough to protect us.

For months, almost a solar year, things had been changing at far distant command. Directives would come to Nomeah and we would be told that new rules were in place. Each was presented to us like a gift, not as a demand, but if one resisted then the velvet fell away to reveal iron beneath. Refusal was not encouraged.

Soldiers and officers alike were simply told that *things had changed*, that *this was the way of it now*. As much as we grumbled and sneered, as much as those angry thoughts became angry words, nothing was undone. Piece by piece, the line of loyalty began to move. We tipped towards the edge by degrees, though the motion of the gradient seemed insignificant each time.

The observance of a festival day was cancelled. Weapons of a certain type were recalled. Uniform colours adjusted. Liberty rearranged. Regulations altered in subtle ways with the core purpose left unclear. One tiny thing after another. Each of small weight of consequence, so much so a man might feel almost churlish to question each openly. But measured again in their collective…

Imagine the navigation of a sail-foil flyer in the cloud-reaches. She moves under the breath of wind toward true north, straight and true. But the hand upon the tiller turns a degree off the line. The sails are angled, oh-so-gently, first by one turn and then another. If no man watches the path of the suns over the bowsprit, in time the flyer finds herself turned to due south and into the teeth of an oncoming storm. And all escaping the notice of the crew asleep below decks.

I recall the day when the words were finally said out loud. '*Today we affirm our loyalty to his highness the Warmaster Horus, in defiance of an aloof and uncaring Terra.*' They never used the words *Emperor* or *Imperium*, because to do so would confuse the people they sought to assimilate into their acts of treason. I watched the new flags unfurl, the noble aquila replaced in favour of an unblinking, slitted eye.

We knew it was coming, of course. In the barracks, after lights out, it was all that men spoke of. In those hushed conversations, there was much talk of defiance. I wonder where it went in the cold light of day.

Here then, was the moment of both my greatest courage and my greatest stupidity. When the words were said, I spoke out – and when I looked across the hall to find the faces of my comrades, the ones that I knew agreed with me, there was only silence and eyes turned away. Dark auras burning in my gaze.

I knew then the true nature of this war, and the lifeblood of it.

There was a lot of talk about what we would do. We had come a long way, too far just to timidly retreat back to the ward decks and wait for an uncertain fate. Don't mistake what we did for courage, though. I think all of us were long past those kinds of ideals. I learned that we shared... *things*, all the adults on this barge. Not just our shared secrets, but a shared experience.

Not one of us had been spared a brush with the horrors. Some had fought them, most had run from them. All knew that whatever they were, wherever they came from, the monstrosities that Horus had unleashed upon the galaxy were unlike anything we had ever fought before. In a way, we were all caught by our own natures; the pure animal part of us wanted to flee from them, while the rational, hateful, *human* part would have given anything for a weapon big enough to kill those fearsome things.

And so we went on, Zartine joining us, trailing at the back with Yao. The boy might have had some kind of gift too, I think. He kept talking about music when no one else could hear it.

At last we reached the great crenellated entrance vestibule to the ship's command centre, and Breng gingerly worked the controls to retract the hatch. For a moment, nothing happened, and then, in the blink of an eye the great iron door dropped open, slamming into the deck.

A hard-edged shadow, so large that it filled the open hatchway, loomed inside. I think that if I had been quicker of mind, I would have run. Instead, I raised the lasrifle as the shape shifted its bulk to pass through a gap built for men of my stature.

Into the light it came, and Zartine was proven right.

A single warrior of the Legiones Astartes came out to meet us. Heavy boots of ceramite clanged against the deck plates, making the floor jump beneath our feet. In aspect, the Space Marine was a giant: I saw a broad chestplate emblazoned with the Imperial Aquila; arms thick as the trunks of great trees; a scowling, beaked helmet that resembled the skinned skull of some giant raptor. The eyes in that face glowed red with combat auto-senses, auspex returns and scrolling data feeds. The warrior's armour was strangely bereft of any Legion iconography, plain in a hue alike to cut slate. He moved with a fluidity more akin to an apex predator than anything born of humanity.

At his back, a hood-like construct framed his helm, built more to resemble the archway of some long-lost devotional chapel than any battle mechanism. It was dark, heavy iron studded with crystals that burned with blue light. It drew my sight like gravity pulling upon me, and I glimpsed an aura there made of colours that did not exist in the common world. For my sins, I had seen those shades before.

The warrior was armed with a massive boltgun, but it remained mag-locked to a holster pad on his thigh. In his other hand he held a staff of polished, flawless silver. I remember thinking that it seemed an odd affectation. With his free hand, he reached up and removed his helm, pressure seals hissing into the cold air.

A war-god looked back at us, scalp shorn of hair, tattoos of intricate nature adorning his cheeks and throat, scars like red trophies upon his flesh. His eyes – his true eyes – startled me with their jet depths. I saw something in them, something I had often seen in the mirror.

Our weapons were aimed at his chest. He did not order us to lower them, but passed a solemn, measuring gaze over each man before him. The muzzles of the lasguns dropped away without a spoken word.

When his gaze reached me, I knew that he was taking my measure with senses that I could only guess at. Secretly, I had always thought myself special, better than the rest because of my dash of the sight. I believed that things were open to me in subtle ways, things that ordinary men could not perceive, but now I understood that what I lauded in myself was a fraction of what this giant could call upon.

'Ruafe Hecane,' he intoned, his voice low and booming. 'You have come a long way.'

He knew my name. He knew us all, every single man on the ship, I have no doubt of it. I opened my mouth to speak, but then he raised his head and there I saw the twinned sigils branded into his flesh.

On one side, a design like a scarab beetle. On the other, a circular star surrounded by a nimbus of rays.

The grey armour did not hide his true nature from me. The legionary that stood before me was a warrior of the Thousand Sons – the sons of the mage-king Magnus. He was the scion of a *traitor* Legion. The last time I had seen his kind, their wargear red as madness, it had been at the head of an army of horrors laying waste to my home world.

The soldiers I had called my comrades did not turn to Horus's banner from cowardice, know that. The reasons are far more complex. They all turned upon pretexts that to them seemed reasonable. I do believe this. There was no mass mind control, no drugging and warping of self. That happened later, with the arrival of the horrors.

I had time to think on that while I waited in the brig, imprisoned there amongst the others who had been too slow to agree or too forthright to cover their doubts. Looking back, I was furious with myself. How had I ever been so naïve to think that I could foster rebellion in that moment? I am no eloquent speaker who could rally men with a stirring speech. I was just a fool who disagreed openly, and paid for it.

They were going to execute us. That was part of the new orders, but they found it hard to carry out the command. I think that was the last part of whatever resistance they had, slowly withering and dying beneath the Warmaster's eclipse.

At first I was frustrated and impotent with my anger. I cursed them all a hundred times for their weakness and trite duplicity, but eventually that rage was spent and I could do nothing but ruminate. Don't assume that I came to forgive my former squad mates – far from it – but I did come to understand them.

The young lieutenant who was the son of a great general, he who was always a friend to the line-officers like me, who never wore his braids with arrogance but managed to be one of the common men even though he was not like the rest of us – he said he would oppose, and yet he did not. Of all of us, he had the best chance to rally the men, but he kept his silence. He had so very much to lose, after all. He would have fallen so far.

The braggart sharpshooter who always had the answer to any question, cocksure and handsome, never fazed by any challenge or upset. He carried himself with such utter confidence that I couldn't believe he wouldn't slice through any draconian edict like a sword point. He stood meekly, becoming a different,

smaller man when the order came.

And then the bluff sergeant who always raged louder than I ever could, her jacket scarred by the number of times her rank had been broken and then earned anew. Her voice was strongest by any lights, but silent too in that moment. She was a crèche-mother, with two battle orphans as her charges, and I think she saw their faces that day, feared how life would go for them if she were gone.

It wasn't hard for my comrades to find an excuse to hate me. By accident of birth, I had already given it to them. A handful amongst the platoon – the sergeant and sharpshooter included – knew I had a touch of the sight on me. In combat, you come to learn such things from the soldiers who fight alongside you, whether you want to or not. Before, I had seemed like a lucky charm to them, some of the men even coming to me, secretive and hushed, to ask for a look-see over their aura. I couldn't work the gift like my mother had, but I tried, and it had been enough. In return, they had kept my secret from the Black Ships.

But now it was the reason to disown me. Someone whispered the word 'witch', and I knew that I would be executed first. All my life I had lived with the fear that the Silent Sisterhood would come to spirit me away, but now I saw that death would be the more likely outcome.

That night, I escaped the stockade with six others, and we found the resistance a day or two later.

'You want to kill me,' he said. There was no judgement in the words.

'Yes.' I could not, *would not*, lie. 'Your kind brought horrors to my world. You destroyed everything I–'

I ran out of energy, and clutched the lasrifle to my chest. A boiling, churning hatred rose through me, and it made me feel strangely free.

The warrior smiled thinly. 'Not I, Ruafe Hecane. Those who did those things are oath-breakers, and my brothers no more.' He glanced at Breng. 'You. You know ship-tech, yes? Your skills are needed.' He walked back into the command centre and we followed him.

The dead were everywhere here, suffocated by the decompression. I saw where a viewport had been blown out, now made safe by a blast shutter. Too slow to save the bridge crew, it seemed.

Out of the windows there were alien stars and infinite blackness. Dallos's cards had played true after all – our ship was alone.

The legionary directed Breng to work at the drive control. 'Your vessel suffered damage in warp transit. The rest of the convoy left you here, becalmed. I was summoned to see you complete the rest of your voyage.' Again, there was the smile. 'This ship carries precious cargo. I would warrant that none aboard know just how important you are.'

'We're just soldiers,' offered Yao. 'Soldiers and whelps. Fodder for the guns and cubs to be culled.'

A shadow passed over the face of the Thousand Son. 'Never say that. No one who fights in the Emperor's name is without worth.'

I glared at him. 'The sons of Magnus march with Horus. I saw it. I saw the fiends and the freaks that your brethren conjured, the–'

'Daemons?' His utterance of the word seemed to instantly drain all heat from the chamber. 'Yes, you saw those things. All of you have seen them.' He shook his head, regretfully. 'Do you not yet understand, soldier? You see patterns. Can you not see this one?' He pointed with the silver staff, taking in all of the men. 'Each of you has the beginning of a greatness. You may call it a sight, or a gift, even a curse.' He walked forward and deftly plucked Dallos's cards from the man's trembling hands. 'You know the touch of the warp. This is what makes you valuable.' He glanced at Zartine. 'That, and one other attribute.'

'We have all seen them,' said Yao. 'The… *horrors*.'

'Every wounded man on this ship has,' said the warrior. 'Why else do you fear sleep? But that fear can be taken from you, in time.'

Breng stood up, nodding to the drive console to show he had done all that he could. ‘Ready.’

‘The Navigators still live, safe in their isolation.’ The legionary pointed out toward the ship’s bow. ‘We will set a course. The Regent of Terra, Lord Malcador himself, has need of those aboard this ship. He prepares, and you will all be part of his design. You… and the children waiting below.’

‘How?’ I asked, even as the pressure of an answer built itself in my mind’s eye. ‘What good are broken soldiers and war orphans to the Sigillite?’

‘Your wounds will be healed. Those fit enough, young enough to bear the glory, may aspire to see their bodies remade, as I once did.’ He touched his chest. ‘You… *we* can be reborn in new purpose.’

‘But why us?’ asked Dallos, his hands knitting.

‘You know why,’ said the legionary, his gaze returning to me.

I don’t know if the words that came next were from some place in my own thoughts, or if the Thousand Son made me speak them for him, but they were true and undeniable. ‘Horus has brought a new kind of war to the galaxy. Bolters and lasguns won’t be enough to end it. A different kind of weapon is needed.’

‘Aye.’ The great figure nodded gravely. ‘And those who do not perish in the tempering will be those weapons. You, and hundreds of others – lost child, common man and legionary alike, gathered in silence and secreted aboard ships like this one. Each soul in this room, aboard this vessel, has been declared dead. The lives you lived before this are as dust. Malcador has commanded this. So shall it be.’

Zartine was pale. ‘Wh-where are we going?’

The legionary strode up to the navigation controls and laid his great hands upon them. ‘A moon orbiting a ringed world, in the light of Great Sol itself. A place called Titan.’

GUNSIGHT

James Swallow

In all things, readiness is the watchword. Always be prepared to act at a moment's notice. Always be within a hand's span of your weapon. Always be ready to make the kill if the prospect presents itself; but be certain of the opportunity. You will only have a moment to make that decision.

It must be flawless.

The pistol was much heavier than he remembered, in his rough, scarred hand. That was a strange thing to consider. He was intimate with this angular, unadorned gun in such subtle ways. He could tell exactly how many rounds were loaded by weight alone. There were six: five in the magazine and one in the chamber. There should have only been five – that was how his instructors trained him and that was the rote command they had taught. The extra round unbalanced the weapon, created unnecessary wear on the mechanism. They would say that there was no need for more than five shots. Who would require more than *one?*

But they were teachers who were long since gone from the war zones of the galaxy, and they forgot that one extra bullet might be the line between living and dy–

He was drifting. His thoughts were slipping into old memories and trivial minutiae. This was happening too often. *Shake it off*. He fought to stay in the here and the now. To maintain his focus.

The gun, then. And the target towards which it aimed.

Across the ragged, uneven floor of the hide, the little man was pressed as much as was humanly possible into the far corner. Hands with long, pallid fingers splayed over the metal pallets made into walls, knees bending and cowering on the scrap iron deck. Head bobbing. Those were tears rolling down the dirt-streaked face.

A word. 'Please…' Then others. 'Why would you do this now? After all this time, you want to end me? I thought we had… You and I…'

'An understanding?' He plucked the end of the sentence from the air – *or was it the whispers that told him what to say*? 'You think you know me?' His voice was coarse and alien in his own ears, the sound of it like the action of a device long out of use. 'You do not know me.'

'We kept each other alive!' shouted the little man, finding something close to defiance.

What does that mean? The words did not seem to connect to anything. His free hand, the one webbed with void burns, came up and ran over his face, catching in his oily beard and matted hair.

It was not easy. The thing that he knew best, the way to pull the trigger and to kill clean and fast, that pushed at him to be done. He had no calendar to reckon how long it had been since he last took a life.

He wanted to do it. He wanted the gunshot's roar and the sweet silence afterwards. Not just because he feared that otherwise he might forget the taste of those things, but also because it was required. It is what had to be done to set the last kill – the greatest kill, the unforgotten mission – into motion.

As he saw the shape of that deed in his thoughts, he could not help but look over his shoulder to the other

wall of the hide, where his liberation waited wrapped in oilcloth and darkness.

And so he took aim, putting aside the bits of broken memory that accreted in his thoughts.

What are our tools? Rifle. Pistol. Mask. Suit. Cloak. What is not on that list? What do you carve from the landscape of the kill? What is the tool that is always the same but always unique? The hide. *Plan as much as you can, but you will never really know the hide until you come to construct it at the site. Your hide may be as ephemeral as mist or as solid as stone. But if it is found wanting, then it will be your grave marker.*

What was left of the medicae kit was spent on healing the wounds from the serpent bites and bringing him back to some semblance of stability. He had lost much in the brief, brutal engagement with the foul bilge-predators, including the belt packs that contained his chronometer and data-slate, his primary ammunition pouch, the fluid purifier module and, worst of all, every last wrapper of freeze-dried rations.

In the iron canyons where he found himself, there was nothing human-scale for him to investigate, no sign of habitat quads or barracks where he could conceivably have stolen some kind of sustenance. On a planet, he might have dug for grubs or found a river. Here, inside the endless metal spaces of this gargantuan starship, there was nothing of nature to plunder.

Or so one might have thought at first.

Unable to reckon the passing of ship-days and ship-nights by anything other than his own guesswork, he ventured onwards in fits and starts from the point where he had boarded, eventually leaving it far behind.

After the serpent attack he had briefly returned to the escape pod's impact point, but found it subsumed under a gelatinous mass of metallic bio-foam where the vessel's auto reactive systems had plugged the hull breach. Rather than remain in the area should servitors be sent to investigate the penetration, he hiked in the opposite direction for what felt like hours. The mechanical, repeating motion of that helped to calm his mind and make the vivid poison-dreams seem less overwhelming. He would not begin to think of it as a *vision* until much later.

But in time he came to the canyon that could not be crossed, and although he would have never admitted it, he felt a horrible kind of fear as the view across the black metal abyss came into synchrony with the ghost images that he had seen in the dream.

He stood on a narrow service walkway that had no handrail, following the metal cliff's edge into infinity. The canyon itself might have run the entire length of the ship for all he knew – a long, echoing hollow buried in the deep bones of the great vessel. To the fore and aft, the chasm vanished into a distant orange glow of working machinery and churning fuel smoke. Looking up and down, there was only unfathomed darkness and, from the vantage where he stood, he hawked up phlegm and spat it out into the void. Cables strung along the length of the great gulf rattled and sang as trains of tethered container cars rolled back and forth below him, pennants of rich chemical smog billowing up from cargos of icy coolant slurry bound for the massive, city-sized reactor cores. Things that he first took to be great patches of rust and discolouration on the sheer iron crags resolved into odd patterns that were hideously familiar.

Instead, he unwrapped the rifle with a lover's delicacy and peered through the compact viewscope to scry the distance.

His hands were shaking a little. Laser rangers picked out platforms jutting from the walls on either side, each made from a patchwork of metal sheets the size of a hab-block. Rarely, he saw bridges that spanned the full width of the canyon, but the nearest was hundreds of metres above and seamlessly welded into the walls. Without a crawler rig or mag-boots he had no hope of reaching it.

Part of him wanted to put the rifle down and not to look any more. It was the effect of what he had seen when the venom was in him, the strange broken scenes that he had thought were just creations of his

temporary fever. He was seeing them again now, for real. *The chasm. The iron walls. The bridges and the–*

The dream-fear returned when the scope settled on the dais. There it was, as real as death, on the far side of the canyon. One-point-five-three-three kilometres away by reckoning of the rangefinder's unblinking eye. An ornate, brassy observation platform upon which a ship's commander might briefly alight upon a tour of the vessel's lower decks.

He had glimpsed it in the poison-dream and imagined standing upon it. In the storm of unreal images, he had turned as a great shadow fell across him and looked up at a dark figure towering high: a war god wrought of adamantium and black gold. Magnificent, and malignant.

Horus. He has stood there. He will *stand there.*

The tremors in his hands were such that he almost lost his grip on his precious, precious rifle, near to panic as the thought of seeing it tumble away into the dark crackled through him. He reeled back on the gantry, clutching the weapon to him.

This was the moment when he started to believe that the nightmare the serpent venom had given him might not be a nightmare at all. Just for the briefest of instants, mind. The thought rose to the surface of his consciousness, then dropped away again.

The need to act, to feel that he was doing something of worth, came next. Perhaps if he had stopped and asked himself why he did these things, the narrative that followed would have taken a different path. But he did not.

A short distance down the service gantry was the skeleton of some sort of watchtower – just the base of it, jutting out over the abyss, ending in broken-tooth pieces of unfinished girders and half-welded panels. Left incomplete by some long-dead shipwright perhaps, or deemed useless in a revision of the warship's designs centuries ago when the keel was still being laid… It mattered only that it could form the framework for a hide where he could perch and look towards the distant brass dais.

Over the next few increments – he decided to call them 'days' – he foraged pieces of scrap metal from a long-forgotten waste buffer and made a deck of sorts to lie upon, and walls behind which he could be concealed. In the shadows beneath the broken framework there were damp, rusty spaces where brackish moisture gathered, and in those he set up dew-catchers. The damp drew other things too, like fat crawling insects and doughy, spade-like blades of fungal growth that did not sicken him when he ate them.

Truth be told, he had made camp in worse places than this, but never so deep in the enemy's breast. He did not allow himself to think of such things as exit vectors and post-strike scenarios; to do so would be a delusion.

This would be his last mission… but then he had never expected to live this long.

If a man expects to die, hopes, knows that it will happen... Is he still really alive*? If you have surrendered to such a thing, can you ever come back from it?*

Would you ever wish to?

He pushed the troubling thought aside and started to build a plan of action.

Of those whom you encounter as you execute your duty, there will only be two kinds of souls: Targets and Collaterals. Never forget that the latter can become the former with a word, a deed, a thought. The reverse is never so.

The mind could play tricks down here.

There were whispers in every passing moment at the old starship's echoing core. Moans and whimperings of air forced through fractures in deck metal or over the surface of unseated plating. Vessels of this size frequently had their own microclimates, their mass so great that systems of wind and pressure

came into play as hatches opened and closed, even as the throngs of their crews breathed in and out. On some craft, there might even be small clouds or rainfall. A fanciful thing.

He listened to the whispers when he was in the depths of his resting state, that trance-like phase of *no-mind* where time was malleable. Nothing existed there but bullet and target.

Or so it was supposed to be.

The whispers invaded that space. Sibilant and airy sounds, most often – meaningless exhalations of the ship as it went on its way. Ambient and empty.

But they could trick the mind, yes. He might think that they were words or names, sometimes coming from far, sometimes from near. He did not like to sleep for fear that the sounds would infiltrate his slumbering psyche.

This is the reason why, at first, he did not think that the man he saw was real.

He heard the crewman before he laid eyes on him – a hollow, toneless hum from someone who had no understanding of how to carry anything resembling a tune. At first he thought it was some discordant noise from across the great iron chasm, until he turned beneath his inert cloak and spotted motion.

Slowly and carefully, he pulled his mask up and fixed it in place. A blink-click activated the thermographic scan, and he perceived the man clearly now, a blotch of false colour picking its way along the line of some protruding heat exchangers.

The menial crewman – the ragged, careworn uniform gave that away – was a glum little figure, as downcast as the lilting, humming dirge. Now and then, he would stop at some imagined terror, peering around as though afraid to be discovered.

He watched the serf find a spot to sit and saw a shaky hand vanish into the folds of a greasy tunic. It returned with a lho-stick and lighter. The crewman lit the smoke and sucked greedily upon it. Every action seemed to say that this was a secret vice being indulged out of sight of those who would disapprove.

Sensors in the mask registered the compounds in the stubby roll-up. Some mild narcosia, low-grade stimulants. All banned by Imperial decree.

A smile came at that. As if Terran law had ever meant anything aboard this ship.

He left his pistol behind. The suppressor had been damaged in the frantic egress of the saviour pod and despite the weapon's insistence that the silencer would work flawlessly, he did not wish to test that unless there was no other option. Instead he gathered the cloak to him, for now leaving it unpowered, and picked up the knife. It barely deserved the name, in truth being little more than a shard of hull metal that he had stamped flat and crudely sharpened, but it would open a naked throat as well as any fractal blade or mollycutter.

Off the hide he came, silent and fleet of foot. Close and closer. The serf did not become aware of him until a cable-train passed by and light from a green indicator lumen atop one of the cradles threw odd shadows over them both.

The look of abject, childish terror was so stark upon the crewman's face that it struck him as perversely comical. He released a rough, mocking chuckle, wondering if the crewman might soil himself in fright.

The spark of humour went away, though, as he realised that he would still have to kill this fool, murder him and dump his corpse into the abyss. There could be no chance of the hide being seen, of course.

And the serf, with his smoke and his tuneless hum, could not be allowed to dither nearby. Discovery could not be risked.

'D-did they send you?' said the crewman. *Letae*. The name was there, visible on a discoloured tab over his right breast. The lho-stick dropped forgotten to the deck. 'This is it, isn't it? They've had enough of me! This is how it ends…'

'Who?' He asked the question before it had fully formed in his thoughts.

‘The others!’ Hands were wringing now. Letae wavered, blinking back tears, clearly considering running away. But then the serf seemed to think better of it. The only avenue of escape was to go over the sheer iron cliff and into the bottomless dark. ‘I accepted the bloody tattoo. I said I was devoted – isn’t that enough?’

He saw the oily ink that the crewman spoke of. It was a reddish-black design laid over the flesh of the man’s cheek. The like was commonplace on the lower ranks of starship crews, where menials would tattoo watch numbers and quadrant sigils on themselves as badges of loyalty and rank. A crude hierarchy for the loaders of shells, the stokers and other non-combatants.

But this was different. The design was wildly complex, and in the dimness it played with the mind so it would seem to move of its own accord. Something about the star-like shape of it made him uneasy, and he refocused his gaze upon the serf’s watery eyes.

‘Who are you devoted to?’

‘The Warmaster,’ came the reply, but it was so obviously forced, rehearsed to within an inch of its life. ‘Horus.’ Letae added the name as if one might be unsure of whom he was referring to.

‘Why are you lying to me?’ He advanced, bringing up the crude knife.

Letae backed away instinctively, then froze. Beyond was only the yawning abyss. ‘I’m not!’ he insisted. ‘Warmaster… Praise…’ He made the vague sketch of a motion with his hands, like some old-religionist at prayer. ‘All glory to Horus. Death to… to…’

‘Say it.’ The rusty blade danced in the air. ‘Why can’t you say it? You are one of them, aren’t you? So speak.’ He goaded the crewman, prodding him with his free hand.

‘Death to…’

The Emperor. The unspoken words hung between them, and yet Letae could not force them out.

Why? Did this inconsequential little man understand that he was about to die? Was it that now, at this final moment, his treachery was failing him?

That brought the cold killer’s smile back. In time, all those who had nailed their colours to the traitor’s mast would pay for that choice, from the most powerful primarch to the lowliest of deckhands. *A traitor is a traitor is a traitor*, he told himself, *and death is the reward for all of them*.

‘I am no traitor!’ The words burst from Letae in a sudden, spittle-flecked blast.

Did I give voice to that last thought and not realise it? He frowned at himself.

‘Death take you all, you filthy whoresons!’ The crewman was immediately red-faced and sweating, furious and impotent all at once. This was true desperation, this was the dam breaking as the end loomed, knowing that it didn’t matter anymore. ‘I won’t say it again!’ he bellowed, his voice becoming a dull resonance robbed of meaning as it echoed away down the canyon. ‘I reject you all, do you hear me? Kill me then! But I’ll die clear of conscience! I am a son of Cthonia, loyal to Terra and the Emperor of Mankind.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Ten generations!’ he raged. ‘Fathers and mothers and sons and daughters, we toiled aboard this ship for the Luna Wolves!’ Letae turned his face upward and a great sadness swept over him, as though he were looking at a loved one lying mortally wounded. ‘What has he done to her? She was so beautiful and noble, and now she’s been… *corrupted!*’

It took a moment for him to realize the man was speaking of the great vessel itself. ‘The *Vengeful Spirit*.’

‘Yes! So strong and faithful. But he broke all that from her. But not from me, do you hear? Loyal, damn you! *Loyal*…’ The last word became a weak, defeated cry. He knew that his end was upon him, and that final surge of righteous anger had not beaten it back. ‘I will not live the lie anymore,’ he said, starting to weep. For a moment, it seemed like the crewman might actually lunge for the crude knife to dash himself

upon it, in some futile and final gesture of defiance.

'Courage, Letae,' he said, warily lowering the weapon. 'You will not die today.'

'No?' The serf's expression veered between pathetically grateful and deeply suspicious. 'Why?'

'Because I want to look into the eyes of a loyal man.' He sat down on one of the inert exchanger hoods and after a while, the crewman did the same. 'I want to know if there are any of those left.'

Letae studied him, and abruptly he realised that he was still wearing his mission mask, regarding the serf through the blank, emotionless gaze of the mono-band visor. He reached up to take it off, to show the poor fool that there was a human being beneath the tattered black cloak.

'Who are you?' asked the crewman. 'Why are you here?'

'My name…'

Now that he came to say it, it was hard to form the shape of the words. He was almost afraid that they would slip away from him.

'My name is Eristede Kell,' he said, at last remembering. 'I am here to slay a monster.'

What is the mask? It the lie of who we are. It is the truth of the same. Each mask we wear is identical and never differs. If you suffer the fate to perish behind it, the mask will consume your bio data and render you into slurry that no technology can ever reconstruct. Thus, behind the mask we all are faceless and we are all unkillable. Each time one of us falls, another rises. To those outside, we seem immortal.

How did he reach this place?

Without the ability to reckon time, it was important to him to continue to reiterate the significant memories, the ones that had value and potency. He had lost much – that was undeniable. The blow to the head he had suffered as the pod breached the belly decks of the Warmaster's flagship. The corrosive effects of the serpent venom. They had taken their toll upon his mind.

I am the weapon.

Kell had been quite ready to die, in those last moments. His mission, entrusted to him by his master within the Clade Vindicare and the Assassin-Lords of Terra, had all but crumbled by the end. He and the fractious team of killers and madmen that the High Lords had assembled did not complete the task at hand. They had been sent to terminate the Warmaster Horus with extreme prejudice, there on the surface of the planet Dagonet.

And they had failed.

He had failed. Only a proxy dead by the pull of Kell's trigger, a ranked lieutenant of the Warmaster executed in the arch-traitor's stead. But in the ashes of that error, they had found traces of an even greater evil lurking in the shadows. A warp-spawned thing, a murderous daemonic hybrid that defied all known laws of existence, a creature that should never have been and yet at once was something perfectly engineered for assassination. A living weapon, pointed straight at the heart of the Emperor of Mankind.

Kell and the others, they did not question if such a thing might be possible. Even the faintest possibility of it had to be stopped at all costs.

And so they did stop it, and the cost *was* all. Tariel of the Vanus and the Callidus change-face Koyne, the mad psyker waif Iota and the Eversor brute Garantine – all dead and ashes to end the existence of the Spear-thing.

And sister too… His dear sister. *What was her name?* He could see the ghost of her face, hear her voice. But her name. *What is my sister's name?* She too was dead, and he was robbed of her. Kell ground his hands into his scalp and pressed until he was in agony, but that particular memory was black and cold. It was an empty shell.

In the end, he had wanted to die. To be the weapon.

Taking the guncutter *Ultio* into the void, seeking out the *Vengeful Spirit* and knowing that Horus would be aboard. He had aimed the craft like a missile at the deck where the Warmaster stood, in that vain, vain hope that he could mortally wound the Emperor's turncoat son in the collision.

But so futile, as–

–the ship burned around him–

–a vista of red warning runes wherever he looked–

–a tiny saviour pod, blue light spilling from the hatch–

–he would only need to take a step–

–the mission was all Eristede Kell had left in his echoing, empty existence.

And so he had fled. He convinced himself that dying in that moment would prove nothing, and it would mean even less. He could not end there, not while he still had a single breath left in his body, a single bullet left to spend.

In the confusion of his headlong attack run, the launch signature of the escape capsule had been lost in the backwash of nuclear fire from the *Ultio*'s destruction. Boring into the hull of *Vengeful Spirit*, the pod carried him into the domain of the enemy, lodged him there as shrapnel might settle in a raw wound.

Kell went over this memory more than any of the others, more than the fragments of childhood or the past kills in their blood-spattered perfection, because of what it represented to him. This memory, this act, changed the conditions of his existence.

On Dagonet, he had not killed Horus. He had failed.

But here, aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*, hiding in her deep decks and planning that murder anew, the failure became meaningless.

He had *not* failed. The mission had *not* ended. Kell still had yet to take his shot.

'I am here to slay a monster,' he said, and this time he vowed that he would succeed.

Never question who they are. Never spend a moment of your time dwelling on the equation of their being. Do not ask yourself if they are fit to die or deserving to live. This is not a matter for you to address. That burden is taken on by men and women of greater knowledge than yours, and they bear it in your stead.

Be grateful for the clarity this brings to you, and accept it without hesitation. Know that the target is the only truth.

They fell into an uneasy peace, the Assassin and the deckhand. Letae had more of the lho-sticks, and with trembling hands he gave one to Kell. After the offering, they smoked in companionable silence for a while as each took the measure of the other.

Kell sucked the narcosia deep into his lungs and he liked it. An eternity had passed since he been able to partake in a vice, or so it felt to him. In this little, trivial act, he felt something other than the bleak, endlessly hollow melancholy that had followed him from Dagonet. He did not have a word for the emotion, though. He had forgotten the names of such things.

Letae broached the subject of his scars and the discolouration of his flesh from the serpent bites. But Kell was not ready to talk about those things yet. Instead, he asked the crewman to speak of himself… and slowly, warily, the man did so.

'You will think I am weak,' he said. Kell did, but saw no reason to say so. 'Let me tell you of how it has been. I've worked the *Spirit*'s decks since I was old enough to lift a dyno-coupler, truth in that. I know all the stories about how her keel was laid down in the shipyards, and I can talk about the men who died making her live. That's the book of this ship, y'see?' He tapped his head. In the dim light, there were

bruises and evidence of old contusions upon him. ‘In here,’ Letae went on. ‘I’m not forgetting it.’

Kell knew of such things. Oral histories and traditions built up around the great warships of the Imperium just as they did about cities on the surface of planets, so big and so complex they were that legends could be spawned in their shadow. Ghost stories and modern myths, some with one foot in fact and the other in whimsy. The *Vengeful Spirit* was such a craft, and the Assassin did not doubt that there were tales that spanned centuries living inside her iron hide. The crew would share those stories, pass them down to each new generation who served, embellishing and enhancing the narrative along the way. In their own rough fashion, deckhands like this one were the crude remembrancers of their ilk.

But their tales wouldn’t warrant a statue or an opera. Not like the epics of the Legiones Astartes, who strode over the heads of these lesser beings and never once paid them any mind.

Letae talked and talked, and once started he didn’t seem to have a way to stop.

‘We fought in the Crusade we did, for high glory.’ Tears glistened in his gaze. ‘Oh, if you’d only known it. When Horus came to the ship, there was such celebration. We were whole, see? And we were the Warmaster’s boat, the first among equals. We were going to be known as the greatest crew in history… For a while, we were.’

And then? Kell didn’t need to offer the prompt.

The crewman looked at his feet, his words turning sorrowful. ‘Didn’t last. The beauty, it all burned away. I saw it, from down here in the lowers. You didn’t need to be a man on the bridge to notice, no. We all saw. We all did.’ He pointed at his face. ‘Davin was the place. It began to change there. Maybe the seeds were rooted before, but the Delphos on Davin was where they bloomed.’ Letae’s voice dropped to a husky murmur, so fearful was he that he might be overheard even in this empty place. ‘Horus fell, and mark me for saying this, but we would have been better served if he might never have stood again. When he came back, he was *changed*.’

‘Explain what you mean by that.’

‘I don’t have the words. Not an educated man. But I see it. Saw it. *Know it*.’ He shook his head slowly. ‘Then Isstvan. Oh, for Throne’s sake – *Isstvan*. What was done there haunts us all. It tainted this ship and every man-jack upon it. He killed kith and kin, the Warmaster did. In the name of betrayal, cloaked it in rebellion like it was something righteous.’

Then Letae told him a story about a man – a tier-master, a kind of foreman for the decks where the serf worked maintaining the great focusing crystals of the warship’s lance cannons. This man was Letae’s superior, and by a commonality of birth he was also a distant relation to the deckhand. This was not an exceptional thing; the lower ranks on some ship crews became communities in some cases, living on their vessels and forming the same bonds one might come across in a small colony outpost or rural settlement.

The tier-master spoke out against Horus’s rebellion and was killed for it. Tragic enough, if expected. But the *horror* was of how it was done. They lashed the man to the lasing crystal as it went through a rising-falling test cycle and his flesh was allowed to burn inside and out for sixteen days. The stasis matrix generator in the lance cannon’s inner workings made the torment go on and on, a peculiarity of the suspensive energy field slowing the relative passage of time for the condemned man. Every crew-serf in earshot was forced to listen to the sluggish, drawn-out screams.

But this was not the worst of things, no. Letae explained that this had been just the start of them.

‘Soon, the spilling of blood… It was a daily occurrence. It had to be done, just to keep the shadows happy, you see? The things in the shadows, I mean. They take people. Sometimes they bring them back, too. And you wouldn’t want to see how that alters a man. Or a legionary.’

‘I have seen the like,’ Kell offered. The crewman gave him a wary look, as if he didn’t quite believe the Assassin. But then an unspoken understanding passed between them, a terrible similarity of experience,

and both knew that this was truth.

'I'm a coward,' Letae ventured, ashamed of himself. 'Weak. I don't speak up. I keep my head down and I work and I pretend that I don't see. But I see. Can't talk about how it frightens me, because I don't know who feels the same, and who is the believer now. You have to pretend, even if you are not. Or it's death. And not the quick kind.' He nodded towards the metal canyon. 'There's many who took that path rather than toil on under the lash of the Warmaster and his… lackeys.'

Kell watched him shiver, even though the air was blood-warm. 'You can't speak of me,' he told him. 'I will end you if you do not swear to that.'

The deckhand nodded. 'I wish I had the courage to ask you to do it. But I don't.' He looked away. 'Maybe you should make it quick and painless for me. If they suspect I've seen a man down here, they'll force it from me. I am weak,' he repeated.

The Assassin had killed so many on so little a pretext that it was odd to feel what he did now – this *reluctance*. Was it that he was alone on this traitor-barge, and that he craved one other soul to speak to?

How long had he been here? Was it days? Weeks? Months? Kell could not understand why it was so hard to reckon the passing of time. It gnawed at him.

He put the crude knife away. 'I need water,' he said, at length, thinking of the brackish liquid he was forced to drink, laced with whatever unknown contaminants might be issuing from the ship's structure. 'Can you get me a purification filter?'

A nod. 'I can do that. It won't be missed.'

'Bring it,' said Kell, 'and perhaps you can aspire to be more than a coward.'

Later, when he was alone, the Assassin tried to find the used stubs of the lho-sticks, just to have physical proof that the man had been there at all. But he had no success. The breathy wind up and down the canyon had taken them.

At least, he imagined that was so.

Do not seek aid from others, even if there is no alternative open to you. It is true that there are good and loyal souls abroad in the galaxy, those who would willingly aid the servants of the Emperor's Will if they knew you moved amongst them. But you must not put them in jeopardy. They are not trained as you are. They may make mistakes. A slip of word or deed. Do not take the risk. Your rifle is the only husband, only bride, only friend you can confide in.

He could not escape sleep forever, though. When it came for him, there was an inevitable return to the moment when he first came aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*. It was as if the ship itself wanted to be certain that Kell never forgot that, even if every other memory in his damaged mind became brittle and piecemeal. The vivid power of the recollection was there each time he closed his eyes.

When the pod hit, the grinding of hull metal under the grappling teeth sounded like screaming. *A child made of tin and glass, screaming as it was cut open by razors.* That was the noise.

The saviour capsule breached as it blew into the belly decks, foul air filling the tiny, coffin-sized space. It came to rest burning red-hot with force of entry, clicking and ticking as the ablative outer armour melted off in great tarry blobs. Kell seared his lungs and his flesh on egress. Temporarily blinded, the Assassin was greeted by the ship with biting, venom-laced fangs.

The pod had bored into the hull near one of the warship's mammoth bilge reservoirs, a reeking space heavy with organic fetor. Caked layers of filth deposited one over another for hundreds of years were home to colonies of fat, maggoty things that crawled and writhed amidst the vanes of the environmental system's bio-processors. The maggots were prey to larger creatures that slithered in the darkness, eyeless serpentine forms with tooth-ringed maws. Ill fate had landed him near one of their nests.

Kell was hauling what pieces of his gear he could from the crushed escape capsule when the snakes finally decided to attack him. Ripping jaws, muscular and savage, bit down and sank poison into his blood. In the maggots, the neurotoxic venom would induce an instantaneous torpor, allowing the serpents to eat them alive. But to a human, the effect was very different.

The toxin acted upon his mind. At first he stumbled about like a drunkard as he beat off the predators, his limbs becoming rubbery and disobedient. Kell tried to stagger away from the serpents, dimly aware of the thick splashes behind him as he lost pieces of his kit to the deep and murky sewer waters.

Then down to his knees as the poison took control of him. It swirled through his veins, reacting and changing, becoming psychotropic. For a time, it sent the Assassin into *madness*.

What did he see there?

The dream state curdled as it mixed with memories of recent experience, the horrific encounters with the un-human that Kell had lived through on Dagonet; the murders that he had witnessed and the twisted things that they augured. Flowing like pools of blood and oil, one across the other, time and sight showed Kell a surreal landscape.

He beheld things that made no sense to him, images and scenes that did not come from his mind or memory. Later, in the quiet times as Kell waited out his endless vigil in the hide, he would pore over those moments and try to fathom their origin. What if he had been seeing not his own recollections, but something from the primitive brains of the serpents themselves? Such things were known to exist – xenos beasts with a tiny measure of psyker-power to open the thoughts of prey creatures. Did the venom make that happen? Or was it something else, something more subtle and sinister?

Was it the *Vengeful Spirit* herself that showed those things to him? So great and so complex a mechanism, and now contaminated by warp-dark and daemon-taint, did it reach into his mind through the venom of the things living inside it, into him by poisoned blood? Did the ship gift him with these visions?

Has my sanity fled me that I think that possible? He tormented himself with these questions. *Am I mad?*

He had no answer. Kell held only the dream-vision-madness-fantasy-poison-hallucination. It remained glass-bright and burned indelibly upon his thoughts, embedded in the matter of his mind like a needle of sensation.

The vision did not change in any iteration that he experienced. On the great dais protruding from the wall of the iron canyon, the shadow of the Warmaster came falling over him, blotting out the waxen light. The dark glory of the primarch, the cruelty and malevolence simmering beneath a face so perfect and noble.

Like the statues Kell had seen on Dagonet.

Come to life. Looming large. Reaching for him.

But in the moments when he was most lucid, when the Assassin could hold his thoughts tightly and grasp some measure of rationality, the thing that frightened him the most were the sensations that the vision engendered. So pure they were, but shameful with it.

Eristede Kell did not look upon the face of Horus and hate him, even though he told himself that he was supposed to. No, the Warmaster's appearance was a kind of black fire that could not be fully beheld by a mortal man, but instead a dead radiance at once engulfing and desireful. A singularity of being.

It was as if an emotional circuit in Kell's heart had been reversed. He knew intellectually that Horus should bring forth the greatest hatred in him. *A traitor is a traitor is a traitor, and death is the reward for all of them*. But the words were rote performance, they were hollow things filled with ash.

Kell *knew* that he should hate Horus, that he and all humankind should feel betrayed by the first-among-equals of the Emperor's sons. *He knew it.* That was the mission, after all: to slay the monster.

But who had *really* betrayed the Assassin? Not Horus. Who had sent Kell and his sister and all the others on a fool's errand, a mission that they could never, *would* never hope to complete? Who had left

him to perish?

In the vision-dream, Horus reached out for him. The gesture was not one of anger or violence. There seemed to be compassion in it.

Am I mad? He asked it over and over. *Am I now corrupted too? Is anything still pure?*

When the poison eventually released him, the Assassin found himself in the shallows of the tainted bilges with dead serpents all around him. His mouth was filled with bits of their scaly flesh, and black blood coating his teeth. Kell vomited the contents of his stomach into the water and dragged himself away, reeling, fouled and blood-sick.

Fate smiled briefly – he found his medicae kit and tore it open, taking anything he could to make the horror retreat from his mind.

At least for a while.

The mission is never over. Until recall comes, until authority speaks differently, the mission endures. There can be no dissent to that diktat. It matters nothing how difficult the execution will be, how long the tasking may last, how much collateral will burn in the act. It must be done. It will be done. You will see it to its ending. You will *do this.*

How would it occur, this killing of a warlord? That was the question that came to consume him as the days passed.

Kell cleaned and prepared the precious Exitus rifle at regular intervals, even though it did not require such over-attentive care. It was in danger of becoming less about the action of vital maintenance for the Assassin's tool, and more a kind of sacrament to be carried out. The passage of the cloth over the disassembled trigger assembly, the slow and intricate testing and re-testing of each sensor grid in the sighting array… These took on the measured and ritualistic pace of holy tasks in mimicry of the deeds that had been done in all the dead churches, burned away by the light of Imperial Truth.

He put away the golden aquila that his sister – that poor, name-lost sibling – had left to him and never looked upon it again. Kell did not want to be distracted by such trivia. The hide was his altar, his cathedral. He was at peace there, for a time. His serenity was to kneel at gun-prayer, the spindly shape of the advanced sniper rifle rising from his hands as a sculpted hymnal made of metal and ferrocarbon.

He rehearsed the killing in his mind's eye until he could recall any fractional part of the deed without hesitation. The calculation of windage, the numerals on the scope's glass eyes as perfect as a symphony's notes. The shape of the target zone like the skin of a bed-partner beneath his fingers, known so very well to him.

And in the finality, the single rifle bullet.

It was all that he had left, and occasionally he would release the unfired round from the breech and roll it gently across his palm. The touch of the cool, brass shell was soothing. The motion of it, the subtle weight of the killing payload there in his hand, these things helped to root him in the moment. They kept him from drifting.

The stamping around the ignition tab told him that the round had been made on Telemachus, in one of the secret forges owned by the Clade Vindicare. Tooled to within a tolerance of micrometers to fit the rifle and no other weapon, the round was fresh – only one Solar year old – when it had been issued to him. The mass was even, and finely distributed. The bullet head, a dense armour-piercing round with a discarding sabot and a frangible kill-core, had been spun into existence in a gravity-null manufactory chamber.

Perfect. Flawless. *Ready*. It only required a murder to make it bloom.

Kell calculated the transition time across the abyss, from the moment Horus would show his face to the instant that the trigger would be pulled, and on to the time of impact. He would have to put the shot

directly through the Warmaster's eye – he favoured the right one, but either would suffice – in order to have the best chance of killing the Luna Wolf lord outright. Once the shot pierced the ocular surface, it would begin a process of fragmentation down to the nanometre level. Tiny slivers of fractal-edged shrapnel would dissipate into a sphere of miniature daggers, each moving at supersonic velocity. They would cause a concussion wave that would shred even post-human flesh, fracture even the iron-dense bones of a war god. He estimated that with a perfect hit, there was a one in seven chance of an outright kill. The probability went down as other variables were factored in, but catastrophic brain damage without true death was still within his mission success criteria.

Anything less would be classed as a task failure.

All this predicated upon a target standing still, without a helmet or benefit of meta-energy barriers. A target unlike any other. *A target… A being of a kind that has never been killed by the hands of a normal human.*

'Impossible.'

Did Kell say that aloud, or did the breaths of air whisper it in his ear? It was hard to be sure. He often forgot what his own voice sounded like.

Could a man kill a primarch? Could a mortal slay a demigod? Part of Kell wanted to find out if it was possible; another part ran screaming at the audacity of that suggestion. In the beginning, with his great and towering hubris, the Assassin had thought it a task he could achieve.

But after all that had happened, Kell's mind was changed. There were doubts.

That was why it had to be done. *To be sure*. To silence the whispers.

Vindicare.

High Gothic, Old Terran origin (pre-Strife, approximate). Present active infinitive of 'vindico'.

Compound word, from elements: 'vindex' – meaning a protector or defender; 'dico' – meaning 'to say'.

Meanings (Multiple): To protect. To deliver or spare or liberate. To claim or to vindicate. To avenge or to punish.

He drank from the broken water canteen, the flat taste of the filtered fluid dead and empty in his mouth. Kell remembered wine, suddenly and brilliantly, the memory like a flare in the dark caverns of his mind. He glared at the bottle. The purifier was clogged with particles, and he shook it out. Had the deckhand Letae brought the filter to him, or had he just found a spare at the bottom of his torn pack? Either was possible.

Then the questions went away as he heard sirens lowing across the canyon.

It was not an illusion, no. There were small flying drones moving around over there, eagle-mecha hybrids probing the gloom with pin-beam search arrays. What were they looking for?

Kell could only guess at the *Vengeful Spirit*'s moods, but he was certain that the ship was ill-tempered this day. He had been here long enough – *and how long was that?* – to sense when something was awry.

They were at battle. Somewhere up above, hundreds of decks away in his strategium, the Warmaster and captains of the Sons of Horus were engaged in the business of killing. Kell felt this more than he knew it, but by now he had given in to instinct over intellect. He had allowed himself to be the feral and reactive animal, the patient hunter-beast more than the man who would plot and wait and wait and plot. He had no interest in what participants the distant battle would encompass. Those thoughts were vague ideas, abstract and brittle in form. All Kell wanted was for Horus to come to him.

And that *would* happen. He had seen it in the dream-vision. It had already taken place, in some other skein of time and possibility. That was what the whispers told him.

‘Eristede!’

He whirled around as a crack-throated voice called his name and Kell saw the crewman running across the metal deck towards him. His face was bloody from a cut upon his cheek, and he was in the throes of panic.

Kell swore and shot a look back across the iron canyon. Some of the machine-birds paused in their dipping and swirling paths and looked his way. The fool’s shout might have reached them.

Not for the first time, he wished that the camo-cloak still worked properly. At full capacity, he could have dropped to the deck and shrouded, and to the eyes of the drones he would have looked like nothing more than a nub of cold steel protruding from the gantries. But now, ripped and ragged, it could only make him visually indistinct. He could not use it to hide from short-range scrying, or from vision in thermal, ultra-violet or magnetosonic ranges.

He ran to Letae, gesturing sharply for him to find cover. ‘Silent, you fool. Be silent! Don’t you see them coming?’

The crewman scrambled clumsily into the lee of a heat exchanger. ‘I had to come warn you, Master Kell.’ The man’s face looked different close at hand. The witch-mark tattoo seemed more detailed than before, becoming scarification more than ink. The lines of it were raised against his flesh, and reddened with blood-flow. Letae was more gaunt than he recalled, too – eyes sunken, hollow of cheek. Even his trickling vitae seemed less potent. It was watery, like crimson ink.

The menial didn’t notice Kell’s fixated attention. ‘There are intruders aboard the ship,’ he gushed, talking without taking pause for breath. ‘It is said, a force of warriors sent by the Sigillite himself!’

It surprised Kell that the mention of Lord Malcador’s title actually made him flinch. He could not parse the strange reaction, and so he ignored it.

‘Are they here for Horus?’

‘Of course!’ Letae’s expression became one of surprise and confusion, as if the answer to that question was obvious. ‘What other reason could there be?’

Kell had his hands on the man now, and he was shaking him violently. ‘How many of them? Where are they? *Tell me*!’

The crewman’s hands came up to fend off the Assassin’s sudden assault. ‘No one knows! That’s why the monitors are searching the ship, they’re looking for them! Don’t you see? If these legionaries kill him, then we’re free–’

‘No! *No!*’ Kell shouted at him. Behind, steel feathers buzzed in the sticky air as the machine-birds rode the thermals across the abyss towards them, probing and scanning.

But Kell wasn’t thinking of them at that moment. What occupied him totally was the chance that the fate he had glimpsed would not come to pass. *It could not happen*. Horus would not be killed by some rogue agents sent by that thrice-accursed psyker! The vision had promised that Kell would have his chance to slay the monster.

‘You are hurting me,’ gasped Letae, eyes brimming with tears. ‘Please, let me go. Before the monitors see us–’

But that was a fruitless wish on his part. A pair of machine-birds fell from the smoky dimness over their heads with tungsten talons bared, ready to snare them both. Fans of emerald laser light washed over the deck around them, termination trackers finding the two men as clearly as if they had been naked upon a landscape of pure snowfall.

The monitors dived, each emitting a metallic shriek. Kell pushed Letae away and the act saved the man’s life, although that had not been the Assassin’s intention. Letae’s bare throat missed being sliced open by slashing claws, the passage of them so close that he felt the air being cut in their wake.

The second machine-bird was diving for Kell's eyes to gouge them out and open the meat of his face. He dimly regretted leaving his spy mask in the hide. The Assassin hardly ever wore the thing anymore.

He went low and spun out of the old cloak's clasp at his neck, making the material flare out into a half-circle of shadow. The mechanical misjudged and tried to arrest its dive, turning it into a swooping bank, but Kell was ready. He snapped the cloak back around and caught the machine-bird in its folds, smothering the avian drone before it could power away back into the air. He snared it inside the cloak, swinging it around by the thick hem of the old battle garment, and smashed it into the deck. Without hesitation, Kell ran forward and stamped on the writhing, squawking shape under the black cloth, vicious and wild with each blow from his boots. He killed it in short order.

The second bird was harrying poor Letae, cutting and swatting him with the blade-tip edges of its wings. It reacted to the death of its mate by abruptly ignoring the deckhand and turned all of its raptor's ire upon Kell. A winged lance of metal, plastek and animal flesh bolted through the air towards him, and the Assassin snarled as he came to meet it.

Kell had the crude knife in his fist as the thing went for his throat, and he rolled with the impact as it raked its claws over his chest. Screaming with anger and pain, Kell cut his free hand to ribbons as he used it to grab hold of the machine-bird's body. His other hand came up in a blur and he stabbed the drone through its torso, over and over, causing processing fluids to spurt in arcs across the iron deck plates. He kept stabbing until he was sure it was dead, and by then his hands were a ruin of cut meat, black oil and thick blood.

Letae recoiled from Kell as he took a shuddering step towards him. The crewman was so full of fear, he realised. It coloured everything about him – it was the air in his lungs, the water to his lips. Kell felt a writhing, sickly disgust at the other man's very existence, as if each indrawn breath that the menial took was somehow an insult.

The Assassin did not question where this bile had come from. That did not occur to him. Instead he shouted at Letae, shouted at him until the other man ran away.

'Go, you pathetic mongrel! I do not want to look upon you, do you understand me? Take your words and go away!' He spat onto the slick deck. 'If you come back, if you show your face here again and it is not with word that *Horus yet lives*...' Kell's words rose to a crescendo, 'then I will gun you down where you stand!'

Letae fled, seemingly unable to believe that he had not died here, and in the wake of his echoing footfalls Kell slumped to the floor and looked at his ruined hands.

With slow, agonised motions, he dragged the dead cloak to him and began to cut it into uneven strips that could be wrapped around his palms and fingers. As Kell did this, he strained to listen for the whispering of the *Vengeful Spirit*, for some fraction of knowledge that the monster was still alive, and that Malcador's men had failed…

And that thought made him smile. The Sigillite too could taste the bitter wine of disappointment.

The greatest weapon in our arsenal is the oldest, the purest, the easiest to bring to hand. But by turns it is the hardest to master. Each killer must acknowledge a singular truth. You are not unique. You are not special. You are going to die and nothing will prevent that from happening. With this fact accepted and known, comprehend that you are the weapon, and that your unblunted cutting edge is sacrifice.

And so he took aim, putting aside the bits of broken memory that accreted in his thoughts.

'Why are you doing this?' Letae cried. 'I have never told anyone about our meetings. I have always been loyal, like you! Always, even though they did such terrible things to me…' He crawled forward a step, seeing the pistol and stopping, thinking better of it. 'You… You made me stronger, Master Kell. I knew

that if you were down here all these years, I could resist them too. And it has been so hard…'

Years? Kell was shocked by the revelation. That could not be right. It was only days since the guncutter *Ultio* had fled Dagonet, no more than weeks at the longest. How could it be years?

The Assassin shook his head. He would have remembered that. It had to be a lie. The whispers would have told him otherwise.

He bared his teeth in a wild grimace. 'You *know*, don't you?'

Letae shook his head, confusion in those watery eyes again. 'I know… What I have seen… That Horus is alive…'

'*Not that!*' Kell bellowed at him. 'The whispers told me about the Warmaster! That's not what I mean, and you know it!'

'Wh-whispers…?' Now Letae was looking at him as if he were spouting the ravings of a madman. Couldn't the deckhand see? Did he not understand?

Kell came closer and pointed his Exitus pistol at the man's heaving chest.

Letae raised his hands in submission. 'I beg you, please do not do this. I don't know what you are talking about. You're speaking in riddles! I thought it was just your isolation down here, but you're–'

'Tell me who it is!' Kell demanded, ignoring the man's entreaty and gesturing sharply at the dank air. 'The whispers keep talking, they won't leave me to sleep. They told me what I have to do with *you*.' He shoved Letae with the barrel of the pistol, forcing him up and out on to the gantry. Below them, the cables sang as the endless trains of coolant wagons went back and forth.

Letae looked up at him, imploring. 'It was too much for you, wasn't it? That's the truth. I see now. This place…' He nodded at the wall. 'The *Spirit* broke you.'

'*Tell me*!' He was screaming it, heedless of any chance that he might be overheard by some distant aura-scanner. 'I want the one who whispers to me! Where is he?' His hand was sweaty where he clasped the gun, and he kneaded the grip, squeezing it until his knuckles were white.

The deckhand shouted back. 'I don't know.'

'*Tell me who Samus is!*'

He did not recall where the name sprang from. It felt alien on his lips, as if forced up from his throat by something he could not control.

But it was a moot point. In his fury, Kell lost focus for a moment and his finger twitched. Even as the last word was leaving his lips, the Exitus pistol accidentally went off and a ragged-edged wound burst open in Letae's belly. Blood, bone and intestinal matter made a wet slick where they were blasted out of the crewman's back and across the deck.

He had not meant to kill him – at least, not at that moment. But now it was done, just as the voices had told him that it would be.

With a shaky sigh, Kell gathered up the corpse and set to work on it with the knife. Into the dead man's torso he carved a single word, making the cuts deep and clear.

The word was *LUPERCAL*.

As a final flourish to the deed, he fished out the golden aquila charm that had belonged to his forgotten sister. It was tarnished now, the lustre dulled, the spread wings of the icon scratched and pitted. He fastened it around Letae's skinny neck and dragged the body to the edge of the iron cliff.

Time passed. He waited until the right transit, for the correct cargo wagon to pass beneath. When it did, Kell pitched the corpse out so that it fell true. Letae landed on the head of the cable-car, sprawled there like a broken doll, and the wagon carried him away in the direction of the far-off dais. It would not take long for the dead man to be discovered.

The spilling of blood. In retrospect, it seemed obvious to Kell. That was the way of things now aboard

the *Vengeful Spirit*, and within the ranks of those who defied the Emperor. It made sense that the lure should be baited in such a way.

Kell remembered the mythical stories he had read as a child, fanciful tales of how monsters could only be summoned from their netherworld realms by a ritual shedding of vitae. *Sacrifice*, he recalled, *was also a weapon*.

He returned to the hide, holstering the pistol along the way. Once in his concealment, he unfurled the old cloth and breathed gently upon his sniper rifle, bringing the weapon to life.

The rifle's one and only round slid silently into the open breech, and Kell settled in to wait for what he knew was certain to happen. He waited, and eventually the whispers returned.

Feel no pity. That emotion is a corrosive, tormented and acid thing that can hollow out purpose and righteousness. Do not pity the target for whatever path has put them before your gun, no matter how misguided or tragic. And do not pity yourself for the acts you are asked to commit in the name of righteousness. It weakens you, and when the time comes, it will make you hesitate.

And at last, the Warmaster was in his sights.

He has stood there. He will *stand there.*

It seemed as if Kell blinked his eyes, and it was so. Through the circular window of the telescopic sight, surrounded by a halo of projected windage measurements, range-findings and atmospheric data, *he* was suddenly there.

How much time had elapsed, or how long he had waited… None of that mattered any more.

Horus Lupercal, the Emperor's fallen son and the lord of this vessel. Kell did not have the words to describe the titanic being before him – an immense presence that seemed to radiate out across the distance towards the Assassin, pouring through the scope's eyepiece and in danger of overwhelming him.

How was that possible? His will became frozen and, curse his weakness, he actually *hesitated*. Kell had never known such a thing in all his time as a killer in the Clade's name.

That time seemed very far away, though, and this – what was happening in the moment – was so close and so real and so very, very powerful.

Horus stood considering the corpse of Letae, where it had been deposited at his feet. The huge man-shape assembled out of iron and armour was nodding, as though he had expected to see what lay before him. He was reading the letters of his honorific etched upon dead flesh. He was holding a tiny golden thing between the armoured tips of his thumb and forefinger.

Kell's weapon told him that it was ready to fire and the scope dialled in the last few notches until the Warmaster's eye filled the image. Kell knew that the gun was shaking in his hands, but the Exitus rifle's stabilizers amended the tremors. He took a breath, released half of it.

Horus turned and looked directly at him.

Kell's will broke and he ran screaming, but only inside the halls of his own tortured thoughts. Out in the domain of flesh, he completed the act by muscle-memory alone, and at last he pulled the trigger.

The Warmaster smiled as he plucked the bullet from the air, as delicately as if it were a butterfly alighting on his hand.

flawless
ephemeral
execute
immortal
clarity

loyal
dissent
punish
sacrifice
pity
truth

The whispers became a roar – a shouting, wordless hurricane that tore at Kell's ears. He bolted to his feet, feeling giddy, the air about him turning dense and syrupy. He moved like he was underwater, dragged backward by ghost-force and thickening streamers of time. The remnants of the cloak, now little more than a cowl, fell away from his shoulders and spun out into the void beyond the iron cliffs. He lost the rifle, the spindly weapon suddenly becoming dead weight in his ruined hands. It clattered to the deck, the sound of its landing upon the metal plates abruptly lost in a concussion of displaced smoke.

Light of a dirty amber hue washed over the hide and the gantry, briefly dazzling the Assassin. It drew his gaze towards its source, like gravity exerting its pull upon a planet.

Everything seemed *golden*. The dead metal, the corroded iron, it all glowed under a blooming shroud of illumination. Too late, Kell understood that it was not the brass dais he had seen in the poison-dream.

It is here. *It has always been* here!

A leviathan moved into view as the light faded, and the Assassin turned as a great shadow fell across him.

He has stood there. He will *stand there.*

Magnificent and malignant, a figure that was swathed in darkness but also luminous and brilliant towered high above him. He saw a face that no sculptor could ever have hoped to capture, an aspect that could have been handsome but now was marbled by cruelty. An immense clawed hand clacked and flexed, extending one single adamantium talon to point at him.

'You are Eristede Kell,' said Horus. 'You ought to be dead.' He dropped the spent shot from the sniper rifle at his feet. 'Why are you here, Assassin?'

'I am here to slay a monster,' he managed.

'As am I,' rumbled the Warmaster, and a shadow of something bleak crossed his face. Around him stood a halo of legionaries, each resplendent in armour detailed with arcane runes and fearful fetishes. None of the others moved, no weapons were drawn. They stood back to give their lord room to do as he wished.

Horus came forward, absently snapping the discarded rifle in two beneath the tread of his huge ceramite boot. 'Make no mistake this time. It is I.'

Kell nodded stiffly, remembering the warrior he had shot dead on Dagonet. *Luc Sedirae, Captain of the 13th Company of the Sons of Horus*. He had been so certain that his target was the Warmaster himself, so eager to end Horus's life and the insurrection with one shot, just as he had on a hundred other worlds. But this was not that kind of war. He had been a fool to believe that it was.

Horus beckoned Kell with the claw. 'Do it, then. Take your final chance to end me, mortal.' He tipped back his neck, exposing a patch of his bare throat. 'Here, I will help you.'

'How…' It was a monumental effort for Kell to force every word out of his mouth. 'How do you know my name?'

'Many voices whisper to me,' smiled the demigod. 'And I remember the names of all who have tried to stop my heart. It keeps me… humble.'

Kell's hand dropped to the butt of the Exitus pistol at his hip. The action was reflexive, even as he knew that it would be futile to follow it through to the end. But he could not stop himself – it was as if he were a

player upon a stage, set on a path towards the story's end that he could not alter.

'I saw you…' Kell managed. 'When the poison was in me… I saw *something*…' He shook his head. 'I don't know how.'

'This vessel belongs to me, Assassin. Iron and bone, body and soul.' Horus opened his claw to the air. 'I know everything that transpires on this ship. The *Spirit* speaks to me. I see with all her eyes.'

The serpents. Kell saw them again in his memories, felt the burning of their bites all over him, and shuddered.

'Blood summoned me.' The Warmaster inclined his head towards the distant dais where Letae's corpse still lay. 'I came to you, little man. Think how rare that is. *I* came to *you*. So the matter can be ended.'

Kell slowly drew his pistol. 'I've lost everything that mattered to me because of you.'

'Not so.' Horus gave a slight shake of his head, ignoring the weapon. 'I did not send you here. I did not force you to risk all on a mission that could only fail. The end of Terra and my father is inevitable, Kell. You see that, don't you? Perhaps only now, at the end? *He* was the one who sent you here. *He* sent you to perish, and for what?' For a moment, the Warmaster seemed genuinely sorrowful at the waste of it.

Kell wanted to cry out in despair, a sudden surge of powerful emotion burning in his chest as the great warrior's words touched a truth buried deep inside him. He struggled to keep it silent. Horus looked at him and saw it, though – saw through him as if he were glass.

'My father's Sigillite wretch dispatched your execution force, and others since. I have turned them all away. Assassins are a tool of the weak. Are you no better than that, Eristede Kell?'

His control melted away, and Kell screamed at the top of his lungs, putting every last fraction of his energy into bringing the pistol to bear. He squeezed the trigger over and over, putting explosive Infernus rounds in a spread across the Warmaster's chest. Horus turned his face away, shielding it with one armoured gauntlet, but made no other move.

He weathered the brief, shrieking firestorm, and when the wicked flames dissipated there was nothing to show that his armour had taken even the lightest kiss from the Exitus pistol's discharges.

Kell's heart sank and he waited to die.

Horus came to him, and still the Warmaster's warriors did not move even a fraction to give reprisal for this attack upon their liege-lord. The primarch took the spent weapon from Kell's hand with surprising gentleness, and loomed over him. 'You see?'

'I see,' Kell managed, swallowing a sob. *I am broken*, he told himself. *Useless and defeated*. 'I beseech you, lord. End it swiftly.' He heard the echo of poor Lartae's words beneath his own.

But when the killing blow did not fall, Kell looked up and saw Horus watching him intently. 'Do you know what you are?' asked the Warmaster. 'Have you ever wondered how many threads of possibility pass through you? Think, man. Think about how many destinies have been changed by your gun. That is something that has power.' The cold steel talon rose to touch lightly upon Kell's chest. 'In this world and the next, there is a nexus of fates surrounding you. Millions of lives changed in the wake of your assassin's bullet. That trails behind you, yet you are forever blind to it.'

Kell blinked back tears. 'What… What do you want from me?'

Horus studied him. 'Tell me what *you* want.'

Before, Kell might have said that he wanted an end to the pain, to the terrifying questions he asked of his own sanity, his fractured memories. But he knew that there would be no solution to that. He was broken beyond mending. There was only one place for him to find peace now.

'I want to have clarity again.' He looked at the pistol in Horus's hand, small and childlike by scale. 'To be the weapon. Machine cold and focused.' Saying the words was an act of both liberation and of betrayal.

‘I will grant that,’ Horus told him. He looked down at the Exitus pistol he had taken from Kell. ‘You don’t need this. I will see you are awarded something better.’ With a flick of his wrist he tossed the spent gun away, then gestured to Kell. ‘Give me your hand, murderer.’

Kell presented his ripped palm and the Warmaster took it. The long icy talon came down and cut a shape in agony across his scarred flesh. Darkness bloomed there, inky and smoking. Slowly, painfully, Horus drew the same arcane octed design that Kell had glimpsed on the walls of the *Vengeful Spirit*. He felt the mark sinking into him, resonating out and repeating all through his bone and meat, replicating like a virus. The Assassin was being changed by the act in ways beyond his understanding.

The searing, soul-rending pain brought him almost to the edge of heart-cease, but then it mercifully ebbed away and Kell was breathing hard, chilly and rough-edged gasps coming thick and fast.

‘Now then,’ said Horus, releasing him and stepping back. ‘We shall see what the weapon can do.’

When Kell looked back down at his hand there was a gun in it, something alien and menacing, something unhallowed.

A pistol, made of glass and blood and hatred.

If you are ever in doubt, look to your weapon and see the words inscribed upon it. Know them and know you are certain. This singular truth will never alter.

The outcome justifies the deed.

ALLEGIANCE

Chris Wraight

Every day he would wake and think he was on Prospero again.

His chamber's chime would sound at the start of each diurnal cycle, dragging him from sleep. For a moment then, lying in the dark, he would taste the crystal dust. He would look up, expecting to see the scud of charcoal clouds and the capillaries of lightning.

Then the chamber's lumens would glow into life and he would see the painted walls, the weapon racks, the empty incense burners.

He never used those burners, even though menials provided him with fresh vials of oil at regular intervals. He wouldn't have known how to do so properly.

The *Swordstorm* was the flagship of another Legion. Everything about it – its smells, sounds, the tang of its air and its myriad customs – was unfamiliar. He'd never been on a White Scars vessel before. He knew of no one who had.

His hosts had been solicitous. They seemed to know more of his Legion's peculiarities than he did of theirs, which was a minor irritant.

He learned quickly, though. He studied them as closely as they studied him. When it didn't feel invasive, or if he thought it would go unnoticed, he employed his cult discipline's arts, gently prying open the paths of the past and the future. That helped him. He understood more.

Using those same arts on Prospero had been dangerous in the last days. The ghosts that remained there had been drawn to him, so he had learned to associate the exercise of gifts with peril. It was hard to let go of that association, especially when the dreams were still so vivid.

But as time passed, as the *Swordstorm* ran through the deep void and put more distance between him and the world of waking dreams, it became easier. Yesugei helped him. The Stormseer was a sympathetic guide. It came back, bit by bit, and with it the sense of pleasure in command.

He was returning to himself. Revuel Arvida, of the Fourth Fellowship, Corvidae, was remembering what he had been, and giving thought to what he might become.

At times, in his mind, he still trod the vitreous rubble of Tizca, searching for something – anything – amid the slumped heaps of ashes.

In the real world, though, he had escaped.

'Did you know Ahriman?' asked Yesugei.

Arvida shook his head. 'We spoke, a few times.'

'He was respected? I assume so.'

Arvida found the questions uncomfortable. The XV Legion was not one of the largest, but there had still been tens of thousands of warriors in the ranks. Yesugei seemed to expect him to know everything about every fellowship.

'He had the primarch's ear. Few others did.'

Yesugei sat facing him, dressed in white Stormseer's robes. Candles were set about them in the modest chamber, and they burned brightly, illuminating long paper strips daubed with calligraphy.

Arvida could sense the quiet power cloistered within the warrior opposite him. It was not at all the same as his, but it was still potent. Warp gifts were like accents – the language was the same, but the treatment varied. Arvida guessed that Yesugei didn't have the full range of command available to a Magister Templi, but there was no shame in that. The capabilities of the Stormseers felt somehow… *shackled*, as though self-imposed bonds had been placed around the action of drawing from the Great Ocean.

Strange, to limit oneself. Then again, in the light of events, perhaps just prudent.

'I liked him,' said Yesugei. 'Had hoped that–'

'That he'd been down there, rather than me?'

Yesugei returned a smile. Arvida could appreciate the benign temper of the V Legion. Yesugei, for all his evident deadliness, wore the mantle lightly.

'Am glad one of you survived. That is gift.'

Again, Arvida felt a twinge of discomfort. What did Yesugei want from him? What did he expect now?

'We have been divided,' said the Stormseer. 'Like all Legions. We purge spoiled blood from our ranks. We need new start. The Khan presides. We will be purified before we fight again.'

'So I hear.'

Activity had been frenetic on the *Swordstorm* ever since leaving Prospero. Tribunals had been arranged. The word was that those who recanted their support for Horus would be offered some sort of absolution – the chance to serve on forward missions, taking the war directly to enemy-held targets.

They were near-suicidal strikes, many of them. Arvida guessed that was the point.

'It occurs to me, when I think on this,' said Yesugei. 'Your Legion gone. You are all remains. We are wounded. If you wish to serve, you could. We take you.'

'I am XV Legion,' said Arvida. 'I took vows.'

Yesugei nodded. 'Understand. Do not wish to coerce you. But consider it – you are welcome here. Once, brotherhoods served with fellowships. Not so strange, doing again.'

Arvida looked away, and his gaze ran to the calligraphy strips. He could appreciate the artistry in the soot-ink swirls. No doubt Yesugei had made the devices himself, and no doubt they had some hidden meaning. Perhaps, if he concentrated, he could unearth it. There was a time when such a task would have been trivial. Now, still weak from his ordeal, he knew that it would not be so easy.

'I knew I would not die on Prospero,' he said, 'but I had no visions of where fate would take me. I still feel blind. You know of Corvidae-sight? It is hard to lose.'

'Will come back.'

'Maybe. Until then, do not ask me to make choices.'

'Of course. Work to do. But think on it, yes? We can speak again.'

'We will.' Arvida found himself wanting to change the subject. 'So what of those coming before the tribunals? Will they all be pardoned?'

'Is for the Khan to decide. He will rule. Some knew more than others. Hasik… I do not know. It is painful.'

Arvida could still sense the lingering bewilderment among the Khan's warriors. They had prided themselves, as so many of them had told him, on harmony. It was bad enough to contemplate bringing bloodshed to other Legions. It was almost unconscionable that it should take place within the *ordu*.

'What if they don't recant?' Arvida asked.

'Some will not. They made *tsusan garag*. Blood oath. It binds them.'

'They didn't know what they were swearing.'

Yesugei gave him a wry look, as if to say *you know what the warp thinks of pity*.

'Does not matter. Is done. They will be offered chance, but will not take it.'

'Then what?'

'The Khan will release them. That is all.'

Release them. The phrase was unusually euphemistic.

'Seems a waste,' said Arvida.

'We bring these customs up into void,' said Yesugei. 'We carry weapons of Unity and wear badges of Imperium, but the plains are still in our soul.' He was thoughtful. 'I think it will get worse. We will remember old savagery. There is bitterness running in brotherhoods, now.'

He looked back up at Arvida.

'You could help us,' Yesugei said. 'I see Ahriman's gifts in you.'

There it was again. The Stormseer was certainly insistent.

'I'll think about it,' said Arvida, but didn't meet his eyes.

In his dreams, he went back.

Lucid dreaming, they used to call it – being aware of the deception. But that was only half of the truth. Part of him knew he remained unconscious on the *Swordstorm*. Another part stalked the ruins unwittingly, still searching.

He'd tried to leave Tizca in the early days, thinking – correctly – that the city's warp-burned shells would harbour abominations. For a few days he'd taken a hard path, out and up into the highlands in search of cleaner air.

Somehow, it was worse up there. The skeletal stumps of firs stood like sentinels across barren hillsides, barring a starless sky. From the heights, he could see the devastation in panorama, and there was no escape from the vastness of it. Tizca's lightless sprawl ran away to the northern horizon: an immense black scar on the face of annihilation.

The air remained foul, even when the gales shook the brittle tree carcasses. He tasted toxins through his vox-grille, and knew that they would overwhelm his system sooner or later. He exhausted himself walking, and that alarmed him: he should not have been exhausted by anything, not with a physiology like his.

At times, Arvida cursed Kalliston for bringing him back. He howled out his grief. He started to hunt, to chase down any sign of enemies. When he loped back into the city, hugging the shadows and searching out targets, all he met were empty echoes. He began to doubt everything that had happened since making planetfall.

The ghosts came soon after that. Kalliston was the first of them, whispering in the carbon-dark. Arvida saw him several times – standing atop isolated towers, silhouetted against the night. At first he tried to reach him. He only gave up after the fourth attempt, when he scaled the flanks of a burned-out cupola to find nothing but thick dust at the top. No bootmarks disturbed the layer of glistening ash.

Other ghosts were less benign. The spirits of slain Wolves still slipped through the dark, snarling in broken, breathy hatred. Forgotten Prosperine creatures, their bodies etiolated into glassy sacs of aether-spume, rose from the unquiet earth and hunted him. He learned how to drive them off, but every exercise of power drained him a little further.

He began to starve. Waking and sleeping merged. He found no flesh-and-blood enemies, just spectres and emanations.

It was then, in order to stay sane, that he started to look for the relic. He didn't know what it would be, but anything would do. It would have to be solid, a part of the old light-filled world. Not a weapon, but a

fragment of something loftier. The libraries and the repositories were all torched, though he guessed that even the Wolves must have left *something*.

For a long time, all he found was more dust. He drew closer to the centre, where the broken-backed mass of Photep's Pyramid still reared, sensing a flicker of energy amid the broken flags. Some of the observatories still retained their copper domes, albeit scorched black.

He broke into them all, kicking aside barriers that would once have barred entrance save to the elect of the cults. He waded through wind-scoured dunes of rubble and pushed his gauntlets deep into backed-up detritus. His fingers scrabbled, searching out something, scraping through the sedimentary layers of misery.

It was just as his gauntlets finally grazed against something hard-edged, buried deep, that he lurched awake.

Arvida opened his eyes and saw the lumens of his private chamber flare into life. He saw the weapon racks and the incense burners. A soft light pulsed by his bunk – Yesugei had summoned him again.

He pushed himself up, shedding the spun-wool blanket in a rumpled heap. His primary heart was beating hard.

He raised his right hand, the one that had brushed up against the edge in his dreams. He turned it in the light – the flesh was pale, blotched with red spots. As he looked at it, he felt the itch again, like insects crawling under the skin.

He clenched his fist and the irritation eased a little. He got up, rolling his shoulders and flexing his arms.

'*Ready?*' asked Yesugei over the comm.

Arvida looked at himself in the mirror over his wash-stand. Was it fatigue that gave him red lines under his eyes? Or was it really spreading that fast?

'Ready,' he confirmed, pulling on his robes and heading to the armoury.

He wore his armour for the drills. Several times, V Legion artificers had offered to take his crimson battleplate down to the forges. It was in bad shape and they were keen to treat him as an honoured guest.

He had always refused. His armour was what had kept him alive, so he tended to it himself. The most help he accepted was the loan of tools and menial attendants; everything else, from the core maintenance to the gradual removal of ground-in filth, he did alone.

He held a short-bladed sword in his right hand but was otherwise unarmed. Yesugei stood before him with a similar weapon. He, too, wore full armour. The chamber around them was white-walled and capacious, with a floor of polished rockcrete and multifaceted lumens suspended from a mirrored ceiling.

This was the third time that he and Yesugei had sparred together. The White Scar had won the previous bouts easily but the gap had been closing. Arvida swung his blade lazily through the air, swiping around himself in a loose figure of eight.

'How are you feeling?' asked Yesugei, remaining perfectly still.

'Good.'

'I could send you to spar with any warrior of Fifth Legion.'

'I know.'

'Then why I choose to best you myself?'

Arvida smiled. The gentle goads were all part of the process – to rouse him, to get his blood flowing again. 'You wish to observe.'

Yesugei raised his sword – a curved blade with a single cutting edge, inscribed along its length with Khorchin runes. Neither weapon was powered, but they were still deadly enough at close range.

'Then we begin,' said Yesugei, moving into guard.

Arvida let his body relax. This was not a true test of his physical recovery – that was complete. Nor, despite the props, was it a test of weapon skill. He knew what it was and why the Stormseer went to such lengths. It was touching, in a strange way.

Yesugei came at him fast and low, leading with a sharp jab to the chest. Arvida responded, noting the false slowness of the move and adjusting for the parry. The two blades locked, screeching briefly as the edges ran down one another, before breaking away.

Then it was all about movement. Yesugei, despite his greater bulk, was swift and skilful. There were no poor swordsmen in the White Scars, and he employed his gifts with imagination. As so often before, Arvida was pushed back, retreating across the empty chamber in a blaze of sparks.

The pace picked up. Arvida worked his straight blade two-handed, spinning it before him in a glittering defensive figure. He missed nothing. Every blow was met with a counter, and his defence stayed solid.

But that was not what Yesugei was testing.

The Stormseer maintained the pressure, altering the angle and pace of his strikes. He probed relentlessly, aiming for Arvida's weak points. One of those was his right pauldron, damaged on Prospero so that it fitted poorly with his upper cannon. A stab there, thrust with perfect precision, would bite deep, and they both knew it. So the duel had a centre of gravity to it, a fulcrum around which they both worked.

In the end, it was an error that made the difference. Arvida was driven further back by a sequence of rapid cross-wise slashes and found himself running out of space as he approached the wall. He pushed back, trying to rotate the angle of the combat and break out into fresh ground. His left boot slipped, just by a fraction of a centimetre, but it was the kind of minuscule flaw that settled such duels.

Instinctively, Arvida knew that his damaged pauldron was exposed. His mind, working in milliseconds, perceived the danger and he tensed to block the inevitable attack.

But then he saw it, for the first time in months. Yesugei's body-outline ghosted into fragments, and a faint impression of a sword-arm flickered out in the other direction, away from the pauldron to stab out at his twisting torso.

That was it, the merest blink of time's eye, but it was enough – the *future*, perceived at the heart of the duel's whirl and sway.

So Arvida did not move to protect his exposed pauldron, but sent his blade jabbing up the centre towards Yesugei's breastplate. The Stormseer's arm duly moved to where the ghostly image had been, allowing Arvida's sword to slip past. The straight blade bit deep, carving into a gold dragon's-head decoration just below Yesugei's gorget.

They both froze. The point of Arvida's sword rested under Yesugei's chin, angled upward.

Yesugei started to chuckle. He let his own weapon fall.

'You saw!' he said, delighted. 'I feel you do it.'

Arvida broke away. Despite himself, he could not pretend that he wasn't pleased. The sight – the Corvidae-sight – had returned.

'It was just a flicker.'

Yesugei clapped him on the shoulder. 'But will return. You know it.'

'Perhaps. You fight well, for an old shaman.'

Yesugei laughed, and pulled back, raising his blade again and falling into a combat stance.

'Then we do it again,' he said.

The duels lasted for six more hours before Yesugei let him rest. By that time, Arvida's body was drained and his mind numb. He limped from the sparring chamber, feeling the old wounds flaring and old exhaustions returning.

Yesugei came with him. Arvida was glad to observe that the Stormseer was at least breathing heavily – the pain-giving had not been entirely one-way.

'How many times?' asked Yesugei, following Arvida out into a wide corridor.

Arvida shrugged, still walking. 'Maybe three times. They were just fragments.'

'But that is start.'

They walked down a long corridor. Serf menials in white tunics shuffled past, hurrying from one task to another. They all saluted – at Yesugei with joy, at Arvida with a wary curiosity. As ever, the *Swordstorm* was bustling with movement and energy, like a great beast coiled for the pounce.

'You still have not told me where the fleet is heading,' Arvida remarked.

'Yet to be decided,' said Yesugei. 'Legion is not yet ready, so we remain hidden. Will not be long now. The Khan will extend his fingers, seeking out enemy, and then the ordu will be summoned.'

'The enemy will find you, if you don't move soon.'

'He knows,' said Yesugei.

The spaces around them began to open up. They were heading towards the more populated zones of the flagship, and great lumen-chandeliers hung overhead, making the gilt and marble of the corridor walls shimmer. They entered a long hallway lined with mirrors, over which ten metre-tall calligraphic scrolls hung. Arvida had begun to recognise what some of the texts indicated, even if he couldn't translate them. Some were records of battles fought and won, others were lists of Legion personnel, perhaps lost during the Great Crusade. Some of the largest and most prestigious scrolls seemed to contain – Arvida guessed by the layout and the decorative borders – poetry.

Ahead, at the far end of the hall, a squad of White Scars came marching towards them. Unusually, they were wearing their helms and carried blade weapons unsheathed in armoured hands.

Yesugei saw them and a flicker of unease passed across his scarred features. A second later, Arvida saw why.

In the centre of the squad, walking along with them, was a lone legionary. Unlike the others he wore no armour, only a white shift. His hands were bound at the wrists in adamantium shackles and some kind of torc had been placed around his neck. His tunic bore a single rune daubed in red on the linen.

Yesugei stood aside to allow the squad to pass; Arvida did also. The escorted warrior did not make eye contact with anyone. He stared straight ahead as he was marched along, saying nothing, his shoulders proudly pushed back.

Arvida couldn't take his eyes off the legionary's face. The warrior wore a curious expression – dejected, beaten, yet resolutely defiant. There was no self-pity in that face, nor was there any fear, just a bleak kind of certainty, as though his body were no longer truly his own and he was now being dragged along by the currents of fate.

No son of Prospero would ever have looked that way. Magnus's sons had a different temper, a belief that all situations could be overcome with the application of wisdom, and that the laws of men were subordinate, should conflict arise, to the law of reason.

We were a reasonable people, Arvida thought. *We were never zealots. And yet for this, the fury of the universe was unleashed upon us.*

'The tribunals?' Arvida asked, once the squad had moved out of sight.

Yesugei nodded. 'I knew him.'

'What will happen?'

Yesugei did not answer but started to walk again. They went on in silence until they reached the Stormseer's private chambers.

Once inside, Yesugei went over to an iron-bound chest and withdrew a package wrapped in cloth. It was

large, heavy, and he held it in both hands.

'This was first day,' he said, handing it to Arvida. 'First day remembering your sight. From here, you will be restored.'

Arvida took the package, and pulled back the cloth. Underneath was a pauldron, newly forged and painted in dazzling white. The armoured rim was crimson and the device on the face was something he had never seen before: the serpentine star of Prospero set atop the lightning-strike of the Khans.

'I had it made,' said Yesugei. 'Your shoulder guard is your weakness.'

Arvida held the new pauldron up, rotating it in the light. It was well-crafted, just as all Legion wargear was well-crafted. The sigils were subtle and drawn in the free-form Chogorian style, ringed by immaculate Khorchin lettering.

It was a beautiful thing. Arvida already knew that it would fit perfectly with his own battleplate, completing his protective shell and making him whole again. There could be no complaint with its substance.

'What you think?' asked Yesugei.

Arvida studied it carefully. It was a fine gesture from one Legion to another. He did not need to ask how much care had gone into its creation, for the quality was evident.

His eyes flicked up at Yesugei's expectant face. The Stormseer was looking back at him eagerly, his thoughts unhidden.

A new Ahriman, Arvida mused. *A new axis to replace the old.*

He pulled the cloth back over the surface of the plate, obscuring the hybrid Legion symbol.

'It will take some getting used to,' he said, truthfully enough.

At first, all that he pulled from the rubble was worthless. A few scorched trinkets, their beauty melted. He doubted the Wolves had looted anything – the destruction they brought was too complete, and in any case they were not robbers, just murderers.

There was no sunrise and no sunset, just a blank screen of darkness broken only by the faint muttering of ghosts. As his body weakened, it became hard to know what was real and what was imagined. His future-sense atrophied and every exercise of cult powers brought pain.

He kept searching. The quest for a sliver of the past became the one fixed point for him and he pushed on, rooting through every library and archive until his eyes were red with fatigue and his fingers trembled.

He couldn't get close to the heart of the old city. It was plagued by the revenants of psychneuein, swarms of them, and for every one he warded off with fire, another five homed in on him. They were protecting something, or perhaps just hovering around it. But whatever it was, Arvida no longer had the strength to penetrate their cordon to reach it.

He turned to the lesser spires. Most were husks, hollow like storm-blown trees, blown apart by incendiaries and then stripped bare by ravening infantry packs. One, though, set further out from the haunted Occullum Square, had survived partially intact.

Arvida climbed a long, winding spiral stair to reach the summit. He entered a circular chamber, open to the elements and with its ruined walls poking up like broken ribs. Lightning seemed drawn to it, and arced around the jagged crown in a lattice of silver.

He stalked through the remains – a splintered desk, scraps of flaking parchment, and cracked and headless statues. He kicked aside heaps of refuse, exposing an elaborately tiled floor. He saw sigils glimmer in the flashes of light. There were idealised serpents, and the ubiquitous eye of knowledge, and the symbols of the Enumerations, and esoteric images from a dozen worlds tracing a ceremonial line back to Terra.

He brushed aside the dust from a stone door lintel, revealing the raven's head of his order engraved there. In an instant, he remembered the place as it had been, lit with candles and smelling of book-leather.

Ahriman's library.

He had only visited it twice, and only once in the presence of its master. Ahzek Ahriman had been the head of his cult discipline but not his military commander, so their links were not close. Arvida remembered a smooth, pleasant face animated by intelligence and a ready, eager appetite for wonder.

Presumably Ahriman was dead, as were Amon and Hathor Maat and all the others. He had not seen their ghosts, though. Why was that?

Prospero's crystal dust lay in clumps, just as it did everywhere. He pushed it aside, watching the black spores clot against his gauntlets. As he moved, his right shoulder guard clicked again – the armour-seal had broken and every movement levered the gap a little wider.

He hunted through the library's remains diligently, but after an hour or so he began to lose hope. There were a few of the familiar bits and pieces, but nothing suitable. Beyond the skeletal chamber walls the wind picked up, hot and bitter.

He was about to turn back, when his trailing hand caught on something buried in the ash flakes. It felt oddly warm, as if powered by a heat source, but when he picked it up he realised that that was not possible.

It was a tin box, battered and scratched, and with the last remnants of a fabric binding clinging to the hinge-line. Sheltering it in his cupped palm, Arvida carefully prised it open. A faded figure stared back at him – a lady, dressed in robes and carrying a rod of queenly office, her face smudged.

Manipulating the contents was difficult in his gauntlets so Arvida moved over to the desktop and gently tipped them out on to a cleared area. It was a pack of card-wafers. Shielding them against the wind, he ran his eyes over the pictures on each card's face. He did not understand most of them, but some were vaguely familiar. They were crude depictions, their colours bleached by time, but the poses and configurations were suggestive.

Why this? he found himself thinking. *Of all the treasures, all the riches, why this?*

It was one of Ahriman's amusements, no doubt. A fortune-telling deck, tainted with a little warp-wisdom, or possibly just very old. He had seen similar things in his time, and had always found them unimpressive scrying aids. Far better to tap the Great Ocean directly, plugging into the heartblood of the empyrean.

'That is not yours,' came a voice from behind him.

Arvida whirled to face it, clamping his palm over the cards to prevent them from gusting away. He had already drawn his bolter with the other hand.

A Space Marine stood before him, his face exposed. He was a White Scars legionary, one of Jaghatai's savage mystics. He wore the same strange, dejected expression that he had done on the *Swordstorm*.

It was then that Arvida realised he was dreaming again, and that even the solid things around him were memories, and the ghosts in the wind were memories of memories.

'I am the last,' Arvida replied, slinging his bolter and collecting the cards up again. 'It is as much mine as anyone's.'

'This world is cursed,' said the nameless White Scars legionary. 'Leave it. No good can come of it.'

Arvida felt his damaged pauldron click as his arms moved. 'Leave it? That *is* what you would recommend. You're uncurious, the lot of you.'

'Put it back.'

Arvida laughed at him, though it made his parched throat flare with pain. 'What does it matter? I will die here. Permit me one last remnant to hold on to before the end.'

‘You will not die here.’

Arvida stopped in his tracks. Of course he wouldn’t. He’d always known that, even during the darkest moments. Why did he even say it?

He looked up at the legionary again, intending to ask why he was there and what he portended but, with a dreary predictability, there was now no sign of him. The bitter wind swirled around the remains of the library, whipping up the top layers of dust and driving them in eddying patterns.

Arvida took up the tin box, sealed it again and locked it securely at his belt.

‘One last remnant,’ he said to himself, making for the stairwell.

‘You should let me see it,’ Arvida had said.

‘You will not be admitted,’ Yesugei had replied.

‘Why not?’

‘For the Legion only.’

‘But I am of the Legion,’ Arvida had countered, pointedly turning his shoulder to reveal the hybrid pauldron that he now wore. ‘That is, if you still wish me to be.’

Yesugei had smiled, recognising the trap he had set for himself. He had left then and did not return for some time, no doubt making representations in the places where representations needed to be made.

Two days later, he came back. By then, Arvida’s sight was almost as acute as it had been before Prospero’s destruction and he sensed the Stormseer’s arrival at his chamber several minutes before he actually arrived.

‘It is time,’ Yesugei announced. He was wearing ceremonial robes of white linen, lined with close-written Khorchin picked out in gold. His shaven, amiable head gleamed under the light of the lumens, exposing every tattoo and scar.

Arvida was helm-less, though still in armour, fresh from a punishing practice bout with the cages’ automata. The star-and-lightning sigil was on his right shoulder guard; the new pauldron had already proved its worth and saved him from taking new wounds.

‘Then it is permitted?’ Arvida asked, reaching for a cloak to drape over his battleplate.

‘The Khan ruled,’ said Yesugei. ‘He remains grateful.’

Arvida followed Yesugei out of his chamber. ‘Do I need to prepare?’

‘Just observe, since you wish to see it. But are you wounded?’

Arvida turned slightly, hiding his neck where the rash had grown worse. It was no true wound, though it itched madly. His hands, too, fizzed hotly under the skin.

‘It’s nothing,’ he said. ‘Let’s go.’

They walked for a long time, passing through parts of the ship that Arvida had not been shown before. Gradually, the proportion of human serfs fell away, until they were surrounded only by fellow Space Marines. The White Scars were decked out in robes similar to Yesugei’s. Some wore armour under them but most did not.

They assembled in a steep auditorium set high up in the *Swordstorm*’s command nexus. A semicircle of seats rose from a marble stage marked with the symbol of the Legion. Battle standards hung down over the wall behind it, many scorched around the edges or punched through with charred bolter wounds. Arvida scanned the banners. His Khorchin was still elementary, but he knew enough of the characters to read the names of planets: Naamani, Wahd Jien, Magala, Eilixo, Ullanor, Chondax.

Several hundred warriors took their places. Arvida found a seat near the top rows, accompanied by Yesugei. Two stone lecterns faced one another on the marble floor, both empty, both draped in Legion colours. Once the audience had settled in position, the doors to the auditorium clanged shut. Artificial

lights dimmed, replaced by bronze bowls with tongues of yellow flame.

Silence fell, broken only by the crackle of the coals. No warrior spoke. The atmosphere became tense.

After what seemed a very long time, double doors set into the rear wall unlocked and swung open. The same warrior that Arvida had seen earlier was escorted to one of the lecterns. He looked much as he had before, both in real life and in Arvida's dreams.

He was no longer shackled, and his arms hung loosely by his sides. His shoulders were still set back, his expression still unyieldingly proud.

That has always been the weakness of our kind, thought Arvida. *Magnus most of all, but none of us are free of it.*

The condemned warrior stood at the lectern and his guards left him.

A few moments later the doors opened again and one of the eighteen most lethal individuals in the galaxy took his place at the other lectern.

The primarch was arrayed in what Arvida guessed was traditional dress from his home world – leather jerkin, fur-lined cloak, knee-length kaftan of spun gold, and metal-tipped riding boots. Illuminated screeds hung from his shoulders and a bejewelled and curved scabbard had been threaded through his wide, bronze-buckled belt.

His head was bare, save for a slender circlet of gold set about his forehead. His long hair had been gathered into a topknot, revealing a harsh, spare face of sun-hardened skin. He bore himself with the unconscious poise of a plains-warrior, though the cultivated dignity in his mien spoke of a more profound heritage.

The Khan. The Khagan. The Warhawk.

He seemed to occupy more space than he should, as if his soul pressed up against its physical boundaries too hard. Arvida had seen him fight on Prospero, taking on the Death Lord Mortarion, and it had been the most complete display of swordmastery that he had ever witnessed. Even out of his armour-clad finery and set in the mundane surroundings of a court of enquiry, the raw *danger* of his presence could not be extinguished.

There was nothing surplus about the Khan. He was as pure and elemental as a flame, a force of eternity set loose in a universe of petty souls.

He did not look up at his assembled warriors. His expression gave almost nothing away, save for a vague sense of distaste at what he was being forced to do.

'So,' he said, his great voice reverberating around the chamber like the soft, dour threat-growl of a tyger. 'Let us begin.'

The tribunal was conducted in Khorchin. Arvida and Yesugei had both known this would be the case, and so they had made arrangements. As the participants spoke, Yesugei translated into Gothic and the words appeared in Arvida's mind just as if the speakers had placed them there. The process was not entirely passive, though, as Arvida used his own future-sense to pick up nuance and inflection from the original utterances. The result was a kind of amalgamated thought-speech, almost indistinguishable from listening to the real thing.

Arvida found the exercise taxing, but it was preferable to having Yesugei whispering in his ear the whole time. He also suspected the Stormseer of using the thought-speech to test how quickly Arvida's precognitive abilities were recovering.

'State your name,' said the Khan, though his lips formed different word-forms to Arvida's eyes.

'I am called Orzun, of the Brotherhood of the Hooked Blade.'

The condemned warrior looked directly at his primarch, neither cowering nor insolent. The disparity

between them was evident, though the similarity was, too.

'State your crime.'

'I listened to the lies of the Warmaster's servants and joined myself to those who planned to subvert the Legion. I was swayed by the words of Hasik Noyan-Khan. I killed brothers of the ordu on the attack frigate *Ghamaliz* when resistance was encountered and only ceased my insurrection when we were shown that the Noyan-Khan had been laid low and the Khagan had returned.'

The Khan's gaze never wavered. It was steel-hard, as if by relaxing it a fraction he would allow the doubts back that had crippled the Legion's resolve.

'And what is your allegiance now?'

'To the Khagan, to the ordu of Jaghatai and, through him, to the Imperium of Mankind. In my pride and folly, I erred.'

'For what reason?'

'I was told that the Emperor had forsaken the Great Crusade to commune with xenos. I believed the Warmaster's grievance was just. I believed that you and he were brothers in arms and that our movement would ease the passage towards your alliance.'

'You did not seek the gifts of the *yaksha*, nor those of the *zadyin arga*?'

Orzun shook his head vehemently. 'I did not. I am a warrior, a bearer of the *guan dao*. I only wished to see the blades of the Khagan and the Warmaster wielded side by side.'

'Others did what you have done. Where their faith was good, and where the blood-crime was not grave, they have been allowed to serve again. They have become the *sagyar mazan*, and have taken vengeance to the enemy. Should they live, they will return to the Legion, their crimes dissolved. I have studied your case, Orzun of the Brotherhood of the Hooked Blade. That path stands before you, should you wish to take it.'

'With regret, Khagan, I cannot.'

The Khan's face remained stony, as if inuring himself to impending grief. 'Tell me the reason why.'

'I swore the blood oath.'

A low murmur ran around the auditorium. So, Orzun was one of *them*.

'You choose death, when life is offered,' said the Khan.

'I swore on the Path of Heaven, and called on the eternal void to take me and devour my soul if I reneged on my vow. I followed the rite of the tsusan garag and committed myself to the universe's binding. The choice was wrong but the oath remains, as does the fate of the oathbreaker, just as it has been since we walked the endless grass.'

'This war is different. Greater powers than you have already proved faithless.'

'Then the void will damn them also.'

'I can release you. I am the Khagan, the giver of the law. You do not need to do this.'

Orzun's face, for the first time, flickered with uncertainty. He looked up at the warriors around him, then at the emblem of the Legion, then finally back at his primarch.

'I have sworn it,' he said. 'It can never be taken back. Not even by you, lord.'

The Khan held his warrior's gaze for a few moments more, scrutinising him for any chance of a recantation.

'You were a fool, Orzun,' he said. 'Even if I had joined fates with my brother, I could never have tolerated this vow to persist. The blood oath is sacred, presided over by the zadyin arga and reserved for the settling of vendettas. You allowed them to trick you, to make it a sordid mockery. You have destroyed yourself, and at a time when I have need of warriors like never before.'

Orzun remained implacable as his master spoke. He knew it, just as every soul in the chamber knew it.

That would not change his mind.

'This is the final time of asking,' said the Khan. 'Will you renounce what you have sworn?'

Orzun's reply was instant. 'I would have fought with you until the gates of Terra, lord. I would have died there with a smile on my lips. But I will not become like those who ruined me. I will not speak falsely, not to any man, nor to the old gods, and I will not break an oath. I no longer deserve the life I was given.'

'Then you know what must be done,' said the Khan, drawing his sword.

He stepped down from his lectern and paced towards Orzun. The warrior stiffened, but did not move. The Khan stood over him, angling the point of his blade at Orzun's unprotected chest.

'Of all the treacheries my brother set in motion,' he said, 'this is the worst. He has corrupted that which was once whole and turned our sharpest blades against us. I wish you had not sworn, for you are worth a thousand of every traitor who broke his own vows. You could have fought with me at Terra. When I am there, your name will be engraved on my own armour, as will the names of all others who would not damn themselves by revoking the tsusan garag. I will use those names to bring malice to my sword-edge, and so even in this you will still serve.'

Orzun never looked away.

'If I may ask, lord,' he said, his voice still firm. 'How many have renounced?'

The Khan shot him a wintry smile, as if the question itself were ridiculous.

'None,' he said, and pushed the blade through Orzun's heart.

'How many are there, like him?' asked Arvida afterwards.

'Not many,' said Yesugei. 'Even Hasik did not swear the blood oath, they tell me.'

'Then the Khan has not wounded the Legion overmuch by ending them.'

'Not the Legion,' said Yesugei. 'Himself, though, I think very much.'

Towards the end, the storms worsened. Arvida became aware of the great aetheric barrier smouldering above the clouds. It had ringed the planet, carried like the aftershock of a nuclear detonation and enclosing the world in a seething curtain of warp matter.

It would have been easy to lose hope, then. He could sense well enough that no ship could penetrate such an aegis and that his escape from Prospero was therefore impossible.

But certainty never left. He eked out his dwindling strength, hunting fruitlessly for food or water, warding off the attacks of the translucent psychneuein whenever they drew close. The rhythms of survival took over, punctuating his peripatetic existence.

He kept the cards safe. Every so often, when the lightning was vivid and he could see them more clearly, he took them out and shuffled the deck. No pattern emerged for him to interpret – he would see the number cards alternate with the pictures of kings and scholars and claw-footed devils. If it had once had the power of divination, that power had gone.

Or perhaps the cards still told true, and he could no longer see what he was being shown.

He couldn't remember when he had last slept. He walked the ruins endlessly, occasionally talking to himself to remain sane. The only other sounds were the crack of thunder, the muffled crash of falling masonry and the half-heard susurration of the ghosts.

For some reason, he was drawn back towards the centre. Despite the danger, his meandering course took him ever closer to the origin. He saw the immense hump of the Pyramid of Photep and spent hours just watching it. The Occullum Square was close by, shimmering with the phantasmic dance of its strange guardians.

'What are you waiting for?' asked the White Scars legionary.

Arvida looked up at him. He knew his name now – Orzun. The warrior's skin was bone-pale, and he had

a fatal wound in his chest.

'I don't know,' Arvida replied.

'You took the cards.'

'I did.'

'Leave them.'

'Why do you want me to leave them?' Arvida smiled dryly, aware of the lunacy of talking to a shade. 'Why do you want anything of me?'

'All these things are sent as lessons,' said Orzun. 'Here is the pattern and we are the brush-strokes.'

Arvida ignored him. He wasn't really there. Neither of them were.

'What are you waiting for?' asked Orzun again, repeating himself as if on a vid-loop.

'I don't know,' Arvida replied, just as before.

Then, far away to the north, where the old Warhound corpse lay and where the armour of his fallen brothers was still scattered in the dust, Arvida felt a tremor. His head snapped up. He stood, peering out into the murk.

He saw nothing, not with his eyes, but he did feel the world's warp-skin briefly pierced. Somewhere, out in the ruins, something had changed.

He started to move, already plotting a course towards the disturbance. He would have to go warily. Whatever had the power to break the aegis might well have the power to break him, too.

'Just what do you expect of them, brother?' called out Orzun, already fading into the gloom behind him. 'Salvation?'

Arvida didn't reply. He kept walking.

'They might take you in,' Orzun went on, 'but then they will turn you. They have their own war now, and you are just a weapon in it. Why do you think they will be any different to the ones that came before?'

Orzun's voice was becoming lost in the howl of the wind.

'*And what of the flesh-change, brother? When will you tell them of that?*'

By then, though, Arvida wasn't listening. He had no idea what had broken into his solitary world, but at least it was something. For the first time in a long while – and he had no means of knowing how long – he was not alone.

When Arvida woke, he knew what he had to do. He looked around his chamber on the *Swordstorm* for a final time then started to don his armour. As he did so, he saw the extent of the discolouration on his hands. It had spread during the night, welling up under the skin. He could sense the completeness of his psychic recovery, for Yesugei was a skilled tutor, but the Stormseer knew nothing of the XV Legion's long-dormant curse. When he twisted his helm into position, the air-seal pressed painfully up against the swelling on his neck.

Just before leaving, Arvida opened a metal drawer under his bunk and retrieved the small box. Then he activated the door controls and slipped into the corridor outside.

The Swordstorm was in its nominal nocturnal period and the lumens were set low. Though thousands of the crew still worked, there were slightly fewer moving from deck to deck, which made his task easier.

Arvida went stealthily, treading in the manner he had learned when eluding the ghosts. As he crept along, he opened his mind out ahead of him, tracing future paths like branches of coral.

He saw others moving before they knew it themselves and used that knowledge to stay unseen. He would wait until the way ahead was clear and then hurry down it, already detecting the other souls who would be hard on his heels soon. He watched will-o'-the-wisp outlines of future-bodies moving in a mist of possibility and plotted his course to thread through them all.

Despite this skill, it was not possible to remain entirely undetected and so he was forced to disable some who came across him. He did not kill them – they were all mortals, and so were easy to render unconscious. The trail of bodies, though, limited his time to act. They would be discovered quickly, the alarm would be raised, and more formidable guards would be roused.

Arvida went up the decks, one by one, until he reached a pair of locked doors. He reached for the box, took it out and rested it against the join where the doors met the deck. Then he was off again, head low, picking up speed.

Down, this time – first via the lifter shafts and then using the manual stairways. His future-sight was not perfect. He ran across a group of four menials and nearly let one escape before he was able to immobilise them all.

He went more quickly after that, knowing the danger but unable to risk wasting any more time. He reached his destination, one of the dozens of void-hangar decks, and activated the security doors. The passcodes came to him easily as soon as he touched the keypads, the last thoughts of the previous operator swam into his mind.

He nearly made it out onto the deck without being seen, but the White Scars vigilance was not as casual as it had once been. With the airlock doors looming, alarms started to sound. He heard the thud of boots on the levels above and immediately sensed the numbers coming after him.

He pushed on through the airlock, sealing the doors behind him and depressurising the chamber. Air rushed past, drawn through grilled vents and diverted back into the rest of the ship. The sounds around him sucked away into a numb silence. Ahead of him lay an antechamber filled with racks of maintenance equipment and bulky fuel stations. Beyond the next doorway stood the void-deck, where his target rested.

Arvida hurried to the final rank of door controls, security-locked just like the others. He stumbled on the first attempt to enter the code, his thoughts distracted by the growing clamour in his mind. He sensed pursuers enter the corridors he had just run down, envisioned them discovering the bodies of the human serfs, and imagined them drawing their weapons.

He entered the code again, correctly this time, and the doors slid open. He locked the portal behind him, hoping his immediate hunters were from a different detail and that it would hold them up for at least a few seconds.

The system-runner *Tajik* stood on the wide deck before him, just as he had foreseen that it would. It was primed for launch, having docked only eight hours previously. Like all such vessels, it was kept in a state of constant readiness in a hangar open to the void. It was small, with a normal complement of only twenty, but it had the crucial feature he required – speed.

Just as he ran towards the ramp, he caught sight of a second set of blast-doors opening on the far right-hand side of the hangar. He swung around to see a lone White Scars legionary charging across the apron, his bolter already firing.

Arvida threw himself to the deck, sensing the bolt-rounds whistling across his back. He scrambled forward, gaining his feet again and bursting up to meet the warrior coming at him.

Arvida fired, hitting his enemy in the arm and sending his bolter tumbling from his grasp. Without missing a beat, the legionary switched to his tulwar blade, and brought it scything for Arvida's torso. Arvida evaded the strike, but only barely, twisting awkwardly as the metal edge scraped across his armour.

At such range his own bolter was too clumsy, so he reached for his sword. The two of them traded blows in rapid succession, sending showers of armour-flakes bouncing around them on the iron deck.

Arvida sensed peripheral movement – another door had been opened – and felt the presence of at least a dozen souls milling behind the thick bulkheads.

There was no time. He increased the intensity of his swordplay, desperately seeking any way to disable the warrior before him. For a few moments, his opponent gave him nothing, and they remained locked in an evenly matched struggle.

Then, just as he had done with Yesugei, Arvida saw the path of the future unroll. The White Scar's intentions revealed themselves in shimmer-outlines, betraying his movements and opening up his defence like a book.

Arvida reacted instantly, swiping his enemy's blade from his hand. It hit the vacuum-silent deck five metres away and skittered harmlessly across the metal plates. Arvida's next blow punched through the legionary's armour, piercing his secondary heart and ending the contest. Polyps of blood spurted out, globulous in the vacuum.

It took two more strikes to stop the warrior from getting up and coming after him, by which time more hangar doors were opening. Weapons-fire lanced across the open space. Arvida saw projectile-paths searing ahead like tracer fire, and had to sprint hard to avoid being hit.

He made the *Tajik*'s assault ramp and clattered up inside. As soon as he reached the controls, he locked the ship's hatches, powered up the drives, and keyed in the launch sequence. He could hear the *zing* and whine of more impacts on the pressurised ship's hull, and detected heavy outer armour-plates descending beyond the hangar's void-exit.

Soon they would have the *Swordstorm*'s shields up. Either that or the armoured screens would close, or his pursuers would disable the *Tajik* on the deck, or a kill-team would force their way in.

Arvida knew, though, that there would be time for none of those things. As he settled into the cockpit and clutched the control columns, he saw the void glinting back at him through the open exit.

He was out. He was free, evading them just as he had evaded every danger amidst the ruins of Tizca, and there was nothing they could do to catch him now.

Yesugei looked down at the battered tin box. He held it up to the light, running his eyes over the scratches and burn marks. The box itself was not old. Perhaps, in the past, its contents would have been housed in other more elaborate receptacles, like a saint's bone in a reliquary.

He opened the box, spilling the cards onto the desk before him. One by one, he leafed through them. They were of Terran origin, he could tell, but beyond that he had little idea what their significance was. There were cards decorated with cups, swords, rods and coins. Some showed images of humans, others mythical beasts. As he cycled through them, he felt a faint heat from their surfaces – not physical heat, but the after-image of some psychic inferno.

That did not surprise him. Anything taken from Prospero would have had such a signature.

Yesugei studied the cards for a long time. He spread them out before him, rearranging them into whatever patterns felt appropriate, before pushing them back into a heap. Then he replaced them carefully in the box.

'Why you do it?' he asked.

Arvida, who sat opposite him across the desk, stared down at his own clasped hands. 'I thought I could get out.'

'The ship you took would not have cleared fleet. What were you thinking?'

'There would have been a way.'

Yesugei shook his head, mystified. 'But you change your mind. You never take off. Why?'

'I was *running*. Orzun did not run.'

Yesugei's brow creased in a frown, distorting the tattoos across his dark skin. 'I do not understand.'

'I am not Ahriman. You see that? I don't have his power, and if I did then I would not use it in the same

way. I am grateful – believe me, very grateful. But you're trying to recreate something that no longer exists.'

Yesugei looked surprised. 'I never–'

'Yes, you did. I could feel it. You wanted to bind me to your Legion. In the end, you would have had me clad in white, with a curved sword and a skull-topped staff, and soon I would be speaking Khorchin just as you do.' Arvida smiled dryly. 'Just because my brothers brought ruin down on themselves does not mean I can forget them now.'

'No Legion left on Prospero, Revuel. No cults now.'

'Does it matter? Would it matter to you, if Chogoris had been burned and you were the last one left? I don't think so.'

Yesugei tilted his head, acknowledging the point. 'I was there, you know, when Magnus and the Khan and others make their pact. I thought it can come back, even if your primarch is gone. Perhaps not.' He looked up, fixing Arvida with his golden eyes. 'So you will go? You will leave us?'

Arvida nodded. 'I have to. Just not yet, and not like that. It would have been… discourteous.'

'See? You are already half White Scar.'

Arvida laughed. 'Not really.'

'Where you will go?'

'I see portents, here and there. Beyond these moments, nothing.'

'You are legionary,' said Yesugei. 'Not designed to fight alone.'

'I was alone for a long time.'

'Yes, and nearly killed you.'

'I will know the moment when it comes. You, of all of us, should understand that.'

Yesugei picked up the box again and looked at it thoughtfully. 'You left this for me.'

'It was Ahriman's. As far as I know, it's the last thing of his intact in the galaxy. I thought you should have it.'

Yesugei toyed with it. 'Do not know. It has strange shadow.' Then he smiled, guiltily, as if chiding himself. 'But it is fine gift. I will keep it. Who knows? Perhaps one day it will find way back to owner.'

'Only if it can cross the veil. Ahriman is dead, just like the rest.'

'We must assume so. But there are days when I cannot believe it.' Yesugei stowed the box away. 'I hope you can stop running, *brother*. What is left to run from? All is in the open.'

Arvida looked wary then, as if that were not entirely true.

'No more running,' was all he said.

The tribunals drew to their conclusion. Other defendants did not survive the judgement, either because they had committed crimes against the Legion's codes of war, or because of the blood oath. The majority were inducted into the *sagyar mazan*, the bringers of vengeance, and were deployed in fast attack squadrons and given coordinates for immediate launch.

The rest of the fleet was instructed to form up for void-passage, and movement between vessels was curtailed. The time that Yesugei and Arvida had to spend in training ran out, and the Stormseer was increasingly called upon to perform other duties.

On the last day before the *Swordstorm* powered into the warp, Arvida made his way down the ship's vast forge-levels. The level of industry there was intense, as the metal-beaters churned out weapons in a ceaseless stream. No one was under any illusion that they would not be needed.

He found the master of the forge, a hulking Terran named Sonogei. He withdrew the wrapped pauldron that he had carried down with him and pulled back the fabric covering it.

‘It is not one of ours,’ said Sonogei, staring at the crimson plate.

‘It is Fifteenth Legion,’ explained Arvida, showing him the raven’s head device set within the star. ‘The one I used to wear. Can it be mended?’

Sonogei took the pauldron and hefted it expertly, running his eyes down the lower-edge connectors. His servo-arms whirled, producing a scanning augur-needle, and a glowing green line slipped across the pitted surface.

‘It can,’ he said. ‘If you give me your connecting cannon assembly and breastplate, I can make it slot as smooth as oil. But you are the sorcerer? I have already made a shoulder guard for you. The zadyin arga ordered it.’

‘I still have it. It is a fine piece. But, forgive me – this armour kept me alive for a long time. I would wear it again, whole.’

Sonogei looked at him sceptically. Arvida stepped closer.

‘I would not ask if it were not important.’ He took the pauldron back, and held its insignia up to the light of the furnaces. ‘You see this? The emblem of my order. I took vows, when I joined, just as you did. I know you understand that. I’ve seen the proof of it.’ Arvida thought back to Orzun, and the final look of triumph on his dying face. ‘I am not a legionary of the White Scars. In truth, I do not know what I am anymore, but I will keep the old icons until I find out.’

Sonogei shook his head unhappily, but eventually took the armour piece back. ‘Bring me the rest,’ he said. ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

Arvida bowed. ‘You have my thanks,’ he said.

He walked away. As he did so, the itch started up again, more vigorous than before. Arvida resisted the urge to scratch.

I knew Prospero would not claim me, he thought dryly, *but this? After all I endured, to be eaten by our oldest curse?*

He looked back to where Sonogei lifted the pauldron clear into the air. He briefly saw the star of his old Legion, bathed blood-red in both ink and forge-glow, and proud against a backdrop of flame.

It still stirred his soul. Even now, after all that had happened, he could not forget the oaths that he had made to that sigil.

It will not claim me, not yet. There will be a path, one I shall tread as a legionary of the Thousand Sons.

His confidence grew as he thought on it, just as it had done during the terrible days in ruined Tizca. He would find a way to elude it. There would be a cure, somewhere.

I will endure. I will remain. The last, the undefeated.

Then Revuel Arvida, of the Fourth Fellowship, Corvidae, ascended the stairs leading away from the forges. The *Swordstorm*’s warp drives thundered into life, taking him back to war, to the enemy, and a future that he had not yet learned to see.

DAEMONOLOGY

Chris Wraight

The world was called Terathalion, named for the species of jewel found in its equatorial belt under mountains of copper and iron. Even during the long interstellar silence before the Ipsissimus had made himself known, those swirled green-orange jewels had been mined and cut and polished, adorning the chief treasures of the planet – these were always books.

For Terathalion was a world of words where documents stored in a thousand human tongues were collated, analysed, annotated and catalogued.

A *library-world*, they had called it later. A place where knowledge coalesced, all under the benign guidance of distant masters on Prospero. For a hundred years after its incorporation into the Imperium, sapphire-armoured magisters had been welcome and frequent visitors, prompted by curiosity or sent on assignment by their venerated primarch in search of myriad fragments of learning. Those visits had slowly dried up as the demands of the Great Crusade had drawn more of the XV Legion away from the loose-thrown Prosperine empire until, one day, they had ceased altogether.

During this new isolation, the world's temporal masters did not worry unduly, nor did they seek especial clarification. The galaxy had been made safe for study, and so Terathalion's patient work continued unabated. They knew that the Legions would return in time, for it was widely understood that Space Marines left no task unfinished.

In that, the temporal masters were of course entirely correct, except the ships that eventually emerged from the Mandeville point in the Imperial year 007.M31 and spread out through the local system were not the sleek and gloriously decorated system-runners of the XV Legion, but corpse-grey, vast-hulled leviathans.

Moreover, it was no mere squadron that had arrived, but an entire battle group. And as the warships took up position above Terathalion's risibly meagre orbital defences, even the most trusting of the planet's overseers felt a sense of unease.

They sent messages to the lead battleship, a colossal Gloriana-class monster with the tactical ident *Endurance*, but no response was received. Orders were frantically transmitted to the defence grid to mobilise, but by then even that gesture was made far too late.

The placid people of Terathalion had never witnessed the full firepower of a Legion fleet before, and so they could hardly be blamed for not knowing what to expect. They were still looking up into the skies when the bombardment began, turning the skies white as the clouds boiled away. Mass drivers annihilated the outer ring of defences before pinpoint lance strikes destroyed every command-and-control node across the northern hemisphere. A rain of incendiaries ripped through the urban centres, falling for hour upon hour in an unrelenting barrage that left barely one stone standing atop the next. Sheets of promethium flame swept through what little remained, scorching it black.

The books burned. Millennial tomes that had been secured in vacuum chambers were ripped apart as the armourglass casings shattered. Archives became white-hot tunnels, atomising irreplaceable volumes in

puffs of burning dust.

When the bombardment finally relented, the few survivors crept slowly from whatever refuges they had been able to find, their ears ringing and their eyes streaming. For a moment it seemed to them like some awful error had been committed, and that the worst was over, and that – satisfied with the apocalyptic destruction they had wrought, for reasons that were still entirely mysterious – the attackers would now move on to their next target.

But then dirty contrails of drop pods split the smoke-barred skies. All across Terathalion's newly tortured surface, clusters of adamantium teardrops crashed to earth, disgorging squads of pale-grey Space Marines from the impact-rubble. More and more landed, until whole battalions of warriors stalked through the rapidly toxifying atmosphere, their faces hidden behind slope-grilled helms. With horrifying efficiency, they ground their way from one ravaged hab-section to the next.

They asked no questions and made no demands. As aftershock thunderheads boiled across the rubbled cityscapes and heavily acidic rain began to drum from still-hot metal, the survivors of ruined Terathalion were hunted down like vermin.

In Geryiadha, once the world's fifth most populous city and home to satintree groves and fountain-gardens, the concentration was more intense than anywhere else. In the main boulevard – now a pitted trench of smoking rockcrete debris – the air itself shimmered and broke open, leaking arcs of neon. Dust swirled and whipped into serpents, and masonry blocks rolled clear. A sphere of silver suddenly flashed into life, laced with writhing black energies. A sharp snap rang out, shattering the orb's fragile skin and sending shards bouncing away across the detritus.

At the centre stood eight massive figures. Seven of them strode out immediately, hefting long scythes in heavy gauntlets. Their thick battleplate was gouged and charred, as though they had just come from some furious battle against sterner foes than anything a library-world might reliably muster.

The eighth towered over even those leviathans. His archaic armour, lined with rust and marked with what looked like deep blade-cuts, steamed with warp-frost. Yellowed eyes glinted from beneath a shroud-white cowl, set in a gaunt face ringed by rebreather tubes and feeder-vials. His expression was haunted, even though there was nothing on the planet that could possibly harm him, and his fingers twitched as he hauled his own great scythe into position.

The crackle of flames rumbled on in the distance, punctuated by the muffled crack of bolter fire. Forge-hot winds tore across the disintegrating urban vista, fuelled by the infernos raging in the hollow hab-spires.

The primarch Mortarion drew in his first rattling breath of Terathalion's smog-choked atmosphere, and swept his gaze across the boulevard.

'Find it,' he rasped.

Seventy years earlier, and half a galaxy away, Malcador the Sigillite had been occupied when the alert came through. The First Lord of Terra was always occupied, for the civil affairs of the expanding Imperium were more than one man could possibly handle.

In a sense, of course, he was far more than one man. *He was an aberration, just as all the powerful of the galaxy were aberrations – a random fluctuation in the psychic tides, an anomaly amidst the quadrillions that made up the burgeoning mass of humanity.*

Still, that did not enable him to escape from the burden of all empires. Whenever one executive order was signed off, another nine would take its place. With every compliance came more demands for iterators, cultural assimilators, remembrancers, terraformers, trader treaties. He looked down at the long list of incoming diplomatic communiqués, and his ancient heart sank.

When the alert flickered across his display feed, then, it was welcome.

'My lord,' *came the voice from the comm-bead in his collar, the one reserved for urgent transmissions.* 'My lord – he is here, and he will not be dissuaded.'

Malcador rose from the antique writing desk and reached for his aquila-topped staff. 'Understood. I will be with you shortly.'

He walked quickly through his private chambers, then out into the corridors of the Imperial Palace. The courtiers and political delegates shuffled out of his way; either they had no idea who he was and had no interest in meeting his gaze, or they knew exactly who he was, in which case they did not dare to. He passed through the image-lined colonnades, garden chambers and libraries, padding softly on soft-soled shoes.

Gradually the ranks of unaugmented courtiers fell away, to be replaced by the red and gold of the Mechanicum and the Legio Custodes. None barred his passage – down in the subterranean levels, all knew his name and what his simple aquila staff represented.

He reached the excavation stratum, and the functionary who had called him hurried over, an apologetic look on his face.

'I am sorry, my lord,' he said.

'That is all right, Sefel,' Malcador replied. 'Where is he?'

'In the outer portal.'

'Then you should have summoned me sooner.'

He went more quickly then, ignoring the towering vaults around him, and the low rumble of the creation engines and flashes of light from arc-welders. The air became hotter. Soon he was walking across bare rock, still scored from the drills that had delved into it, and had to step over the bronze-lined cables that lay like serpents across his path.

Malcador found him just inside the first gate, with the sound of macrohammers ringing through those dark arches. He was standing, staring up at the unfinished portal, his grey face lost in thought.

Following his gaze, Malcador drew up alongside him. It was an octagonal gateway, three hundred metres across, reinforced with an adamantium collar and ringed with the runes of Old Earth.

A Titan could have walked through that gate. Perhaps, in time, one would.

'What is it for?' the watcher asked.

The question felt premature. The portal would not be finished for decades yet. Its immense frame opened up onto nothing but bare rock – it was a door to nowhere, fashioned at enormous expense and in conditions of the utmost secrecy.

'Why are you here, Mortarion?' Malcador asked, as gently as he could.

'What is it for?' the primarch repeated.

Malcador placed a withered hand upon Mortarion's back, making to usher him away but not being so foolish as to actually push. 'Come with me. We should talk.'

The primarch glared down at him, his toxin-scarred features etched with contempt. 'One day, old man,' he said, curling his gauntlet into a fist, 'one of us will leave you gasping in the dust. Perhaps it will be me.'

'No doubt you are right. Now, please, come away from the gate.'

'Why? Is it dangerous?'

Malcador didn't look up at it. He never liked to look at it.

'Not yet,' he said.

Lermenta didn't run immediately. She'd known that it was the end as soon as she had seen the first augur-

pinpricks confirmed. As one of the higher-ranking syndics of Geryiadha's administrative archival cadre, she was privy to things that others weren't, although on that day she found that she couldn't take any particular pleasure in that.

She had made her way quickly down from the main collation spire and jogged through the rows and rows of bookshelves, allowing herself a momentary twinge of sorrow as the titles passed by in the gloom. By the time the warning sirens were sounding, she had made it out of the core and into open air. She'd looked up, as if she might catch a glimpse of the ships that she knew were falling into position above her. The sky had been a pale, pure green, just as it was every morning during the tithe-season. Like most things on Terathalion, it had always had a sparse beauty to it.

Now that was all gone, stirred up into fire-edged storms that shed acid rain-like tears. Everything stank of cordite, mingled with the hot-metal aroma of plasma-discharge. She crouched under the shadow of a shattered medicae unit, feeling numb even amidst the burning. Her scholar's smock clung to her, driven by the racing fire-wind.

She'd seen whole kill-squads of Space Marines moving through the city zones, cutting down survivors with chilling expertise. They had never made a sound, save for the crunch of boots on bone and the coarse bark of their outsized bolters.

They didn't scare her, but it drove the others mad with fear. Those that could still run sprinted for the city limits, no doubt hoping that if they could just get clear of the drop zone then they might have a chance.

Lermenta watched them from her inadequate shelter. They were doing what every instinct told them to do, though it made them terrifyingly easy to kill. She could only watch as men, women and children were gunned down at range, cut apart up close or crushed beneath the treads of tanks brought down by bulk landers. Terathalion had been home to a population in the billions, and it took a while for even the Legiones Astartes to track them all down.

When she had to move, she kept her body low and hugged the remnants of whatever buildings still stood. The rockcrete was hot to the touch, burning through the soles of her regulation sandals. She didn't have a plan. There was precious little to plan *for* when the entire planet was clearly being torn apart, and all that remained was a dumb, animalistic sense of wanting to stay intact for just a little bit longer.

She went south, towards the old rivercourse where industrial hoppers for the jewel-trade stood. Those were made of plasteel and adamantium, enough to withstand the smelters, so some of them might still be standing. As she flitted between hollow wall sections, she felt her heart thudding in her chest, tight and rapid.

She was so wrapped up in picking a route that she heard the boot-falls too late. Cursing under her breath, she did what all the others did and broke into a sprint. She did not look back.

Perhaps they hadn't seen her, in which case she might still race through the shadows and get away.

Perhaps they hadn't seen her.

The absurdity of the thought was amusing, in spite of what it portended. These were *Space Marines*. They heard *everything*, they saw *everything*. Still, she ran on, gasping in the ash-thick air, weaving through what remained of an old manufactory depot. She veered hard around a corner, skidding on the rain-washed stone.

Ahead of her, a long alley stretched away, lined with the empty corpses of drive-housings.

At the far end, she saw him waiting.

He was massive, far bigger in the flesh than she had ever conceived he might be, radiating an aura of such astonishing psychic authority that it made her want to gasp out loud. The elements themselves seemed to sheer away from him, though his scythe's energised blade ran with boiling rainwater. She wanted to look away but the yellowed eyes held her fast. He walked slowly towards her, looming through twisting

palls of smog, cracking the road surface under his heavy tread.

For a moment, as she stared up at the approaching face, she was only struck by one thing in particular.

Pain. The primarch's grey visage was twisted into what looked like a permanent wince, half-hidden behind a hissing rebreather intake.

'What do you want here?' she managed to blurt out, hearing the arrival of more Death Guard coming up behind her.

Mortarion shot her a withering look, as if to say, *Don't try that with me*. He grabbed her chin and held it up, pinching it between the plates of his elaborate gauntlet and held her gaze for a little while longer. It felt like knives being shoved into her lungs. Then, mercifully, he released her. He gestured to his entourage, and Lermenta felt two hands grip her by the shoulders.

'We have it,' Mortarion announced, though not to her, and in a voice that sounded like a flail being dragged across rusted iron. 'I will return to the ship. You may destroy what remains.'

Malcador took Mortarion back up to his personal chambers, high up on the slopes overlooking the vast sprawl of the palace's grand halls and spires. The Sigillite had spent more than a mortal lifetime making it a place of beauty and sanctuary, but Mortarion seemed barely to notice what had been placed there. The primarch simply stood on the polished marble, exuding vapours, his breathing a coarse scrape.

'I would see my father now.'

'The Emperor is not available,' Malcador replied.

'Where is he?'

'I do not know.'

Mortarion snorted. 'You know his every movement. You know his every thought.'

'No. No man knows those things.'

Mortarion started pacing, kicking aside priceless pieces of antique furniture as he went. 'He cannot keep me here for much longer. He tries my patience.'

'Your Legion awaits you, and the last preparations are being made. You will join them soon enough.'

Mortarion turned on him, his eyes flashing with frustrated anger. 'Then why imprison me here? Did he do this to any of my brothers?'

Malcador noticed the edge of unreason in his guest's face, and wondered if it was getting worse. All the gene-progeny of the Great Project had been damaged by the scattering, but Mortarion's wounds ran deeper than most. Angron had been physically damaged, and Curze's mind had sunk into darkness, but Mortarion seemed to have been inherited something of both *afflictions. The Emperor's desire to keep him a while on Terra prior to joining the Crusade had been motivated from the highest intentions, just as all the decisions they had jointly made had been. That did not mean that it was the* right *decision, nor that the poisons could all be extracted…*

'You were all given different gifts,' explained Malcador patiently. 'You have all had different trials.'

'None had more than I,' muttered Mortarion.

'I know you believe that.'

Mortarion turned back to the view, wrinkling his grey skin against the glare. 'You have done nothing but preach at me since I was brought here. You talk of the Imperial Truth, and yet you are neck-deep in witchery.' He grimaced beneath his rebreather, making the skin around his temples wrinkle. 'I can smell it on you. As soon as I leave your presence, you will be back at your spellbook.'

Malcador suppressed a sigh. This again.

'There are no spells*, Mortarion. You know that.'*

'What is the gate you are building down there?'

'I did not say it was a gate.'

'It has eight sides. It is surrounded by numerological symbols. I could smell the incense.'

'Your father has many projects.'

The primarch nodded. 'He does. He starts many things, and discards them when they no longer keep His interest. There are times when I think He may have started too many, and that they will come back to haunt Him.'

'There is a purpose,' Malcador replied. 'A design. Some things He is able to explain now, and some He will explain later. All we ask – all we have ever asked – is for a little trust.'

When Mortarion made his move, it was surprisingly quick.

He whirled, his gauntlet flashing out, catching the frail lord by the neck and gripping tight. Malcador struggled for breath, looking up into the mask of sudden hatred now looming over him. The primarch still bore the stench of Barbarus upon his armour.

'Trust?' *Mortarion hissed. 'I see your foulness before me, as plain as the sun. You are a sorcerer, old man, and the stink of it makes me wish to vomit.'*

For once, Malcador struggled for the right words. He could have used his art to defend himself, but that would only enrage the primarch further. There was so much subtlety at stake – the nature of the psyker, the proper use of the human mind – but such arguments were hard to formulate with a gene-forged fist around one's throat.

Then Mortarion let go as suddenly as he had grasped him and snorted contemptuously as Malcador only barely found his feet.

'You must think me stupid,' he snarled. 'A peasant of Barbarus, not fit to walk the same paths as my illustrious brothers. But I see through you, old man. I see what you are, and I tell you this – I will never serve in your Crusade while there are witches among us.'

Mortarion's toxin-spoiled voice shook with fervour, but Malcador composed himself. At one time or another, all of the primarchs had exerted their strength in his presence. They seemed to enjoy demonstrating their physical prowess over him, as if perpetually resentful of his privileged place at their father's side. He had gotten used to letting the slights pass.

'Do you… really mean… that?' Malcador managed to ask, and Mortarion's glower was all the confirmation he needed. 'Very well. I had hoped to show you this later… when matters were at a greater stage of readiness… but perhaps now will serve.'

He brushed down his robes, trying not to show just how much Mortarion's choking grip had pained him, and gestured towards a pair of mahogany doors that led to a chamber normally off-limits to all but himself and the Emperor.

'After you. I think you will find this… interesting.'

The primarch's chamber aboard the *Endurance* was cluttered and claustrophobic. Lermenta let her eyes run across it, taking in the piles of old equipment scattered across the black pressed-metal floor. Perhaps once it had been a finely appointed space, decked with fine items more in keeping with a private retreat of an Emperor's son, though now it looked more like the domain of a mind teetering on the edge of insanity. Rolls of crumpled parchment spilled across collections of ephemera from a thousand worlds – stuffed xenos heads, astrolabes, divination boards made of rosewood and iron, leather-bound manuals on numerology, or knapped-flint knives of all sizes tied with lengths of twine.

The floor had been etched with concentric circles, each marked with a different rune. Iron lozenges, also marked with sigils, hung on chains from the arched ceiling, twisting gently under the dim light of

flickering torches. The air was close and as hot as blood.

Lermenta was shackled tightly by her wrists, neck and ankles, bound to an iron frame that stood at the far end of the ramshackle chamber, facing in towards the circles.

She had to twist her head to catch a glimpse of Mortarion. An eye-shaped viewportal stood over to her left, taking up nearly the entire height of the outward-facing chamber wall. Terathalion could be seen through the armourglass, still glowing brightly in the void and betraying little of its ongoing pain. Mortarion stood before the portal, breathing deeply, watching the planet die. Every so often he would twitch, or his gauntlets would clench, or his rebreather would emit a faint choke of expelled air. He had been standing there for over an hour. Since the Legion menials had pinned her to the frame and left the two of them alone in the chamber, he had said nothing.

'So, you did that all just to find me?' asked Lermenta, growing tired of the enforced silence.

Mortarion turned upon her slowly. His every movement was deliberate, as though weighed down by a terrible weariness. Up close, Lermenta could see barely-healed wounds beneath the shadow of his cowl.

What could wound him? What could even scratch *him?*

'Not all of it,' he rasped throatily, his rebreather clicking as it filtered his words. 'It is good to destroy a world. It purifies the soul.'

Lermenta raised an eyebrow. The primarch's voice sounded strangely febrile.

He limped past her, coming to rest at the epicentre of the rune-circles. He folded his arms and regarded her. 'For a long time,' he said, 'I believed what my new father told me. I told myself that you were a myth.'

'Well, you can see that's not true.'

'I *see* a mortal woman.' Mortarion said. 'I could snap your neck with my fingertips.'

'Such a charmer.'

Mortarion advanced towards her, his tortured face looking oddly distracted. He stared at her like a man might stare at a newly discovered tumour.

'How long were you down there with them?'

'Twenty-five years,' she replied.

'And the mortal you consumed?'

'I forget. I can't ask her anymore – she quickly lost her mind.'

'Why were you sent?'

'I was not *sent*,' Lermenta snapped. 'I chose it. There were priceless things down there and now you have destroyed them all. Your brother Magnus will be angry, when he returns.'

'Do not speak to me of my brothers. Any of them.'

Mortarion was studying her intently. Close up, Lermenta could smell the chemical tang of his armour-systems, the ripe edge to his extruded breath. She could see the minuscule darts of his pupils, and the faint hidden spasms around his mouth.

'You are *foul* to me,' he pronounced at last.

Lermenta bowed as much as her bonds would let her. 'Yet you are nothing less than astonishing to me. I am full of admiration. Truthfully, I did not expect to endure long enough to see you at such… quarters.'

The flattery made no impact – Mortarion's psyche was so inured to disdain that he could no longer see anything other than veiled contempt. Lermenta could almost hear that paranoia echoing in his mind, pursuing him, dragging at his mighty, wounded soul.

'My brothers are already using your kind,' Mortarion told her. 'They tell me Lorgar willingly infects his warriors. And there is Fulgrim.' Mortarion shuddered. 'I wonder at it. The hypocrisy.'

'You should not. They have seen the order of nature and accepted it.'

Mortarion smiled joylessly behind the rebreather. He turned, gesturing to the collection of esoterica in his chambers. 'These are wards,' he said. 'Protections against the dark. Sorcery is a cancer. We must guard against it. Push it *back*.' He shuffled over to one of the scrolls and idly traced a finger over the text. 'The ancient Terrans believed in one god. Infinite. Omnipotent. That gave them a conundrum – how to describe perfection? What words could possibly suffice?'

Mortarion crumpled the parchment in his fist. His fingers were almost trembling.

'All they allowed themselves was the *via negativa* – to speak of what their god was *not* like. And when they had exhausted all the things that were not true, what remained in the blind spot was his nature.' He looked back at her, and the evident loathing returned. 'I surround myself with all that is *not* the warp, for it is hateful to me. Whatever remains is corruption. I seek it out. I destroy it.'

'And yet,' said Lermenta, 'of all that world's souls, you chose to preserve me.'

Mortarion's right eyelid twitched. 'For now.'

'Why?'

He drew close again, and it was all Lermenta could do not to shrink back in her bonds. 'I am surrounded by the damned,' he said. 'Jaghatai was right – I am on my own with them. The aether stains everything. But I *will* understand it. And I will *overcome* it.'

'Oh, for pity. Nothing can overcome it.'

The primarch loomed over her, and his shadowed face boiled with an old, old resentment. 'All things can be overcome,' he hissed. 'Your final task, *daemon*, is to show me how.'

Malcador ushered Mortarion into a narrow chamber. The only furniture was a long, low table draped in black silk. When the doors were closed behind them, the room sank into a velvety darkness.

Malcador gestured with his index finger and a hololith emerged over the table, tiny points of light glinting like diamonds in the air. It was a tri-map of the galactic sector.

'It took us a long time to find a suitable location,' Malcador said, as the display gradually zoomed in. 'A very *long time.'*

He watched as Mortarion's shrewd, suspicious eyes took in every detail – the inbound ship trajectory markers and the manifest logs that flickered in scrolling lists.

'Then there were the negotiations with Mars. I thought they'd be pleased to help, but there are always difficulties to unravel. But the work, I am happy to say, is now advanced.'

The hololith continued to cycle in closer. A planet swam into focus, its surface wracked by tectonic faultlines.

'Where is this place?' asked Mortarion.

'You tell me you will refuse to serve if psychic potential remains in the Legions,' said Malcador, watching the view continue to expand. 'I believe you. It has been at the forefront of the Emperor's mind for many generations. There are complexities to overcome, but much of His labour has been expended on that very question. This is a part of it.'

Mortarion gazed at the planetscape before them. There were rainy images of vast Mechanicum void-engines hanging in low orbit, and terraforming crawlers being lifted down through a volatile atmosphere. Other projections shimmered into life – a huge complex, rising out of a desolate landscape of volcanic ash, radiating out from a massive central arena.

'Imagine it,' said Malcador. 'If a way could be found to remove the warp from the arteries of the Imperium. If the armies of humanity could travel without use of the Navigator gene. If the psykers could be withdrawn from the Legions, steadily and with caution. We have already begun to prepare for this day. It will not be easy, for there are powerful forces ranged against us, both within and without.'

Malcador arrested the zoom, hovering over the half-built arena. It was a colossal space, a palace in its own right, carved out of the volcanic wound of another world.

'This is Nikaea, Mortarion. It is a world with a destiny, and you *will have a part to play there.'*

Mortarion appeared to be caught between emotions – the perennial distrust, leavened by an undoubted curiosity.

'What are you telling me?' he asked, grudgingly.

'That you are valued, Mortarion. You will be mighty, as strong as the bones of the earth, and a pillar of your Father's vision.' Malcador dared reach out to him, to rest a hand on the primarch's colossal wrist. 'Remain true to us, and He will give you this. You will speak there, to make your case before the eyes of the entire Imperium, to unburden yourself of the things that you now carry unaided. For now, we must perforce build an empire with forbidden tools. But a day will *come when all these things are no longer necessary.'*

Mortarion's eyes remained fixed upon the arena. It was as if he were already imagining himself standing there.

For a long time, he said nothing. Then, slowly, his demeanour changed.

'Tell me more,' he said.

'You are a fool,' said Lermenta, interested to see how far she could push the primarch. She guessed that it would not be very far – he was already teetering on the precipice. She had heard of what had been done to him on Barbarus, and did not wonder at the monster that had been produced. In some ways, it was a miracle that he still had any sanity left at all.

'I have learned many things,' wheezed Mortarion, gesturing to the arcane objects strewn across the floor. 'Your kind can be warded against. You can be bound. You can be used, like blades, and then sent back to the hells that spawned you.'

Lermenta felt like laughing in his face. She had heard the same screeds from a thousand other mortals over the aeons, each one convinced that he alone had found a way to negotiate with the gods for no price at all.

'Let me tell you of the empyrean,' she said. 'There are many great forces in the aether, and one of them has your name etched over his rusting throne. He is waiting, though not for very much longer. It matters not how many trinkets you rattle or wave – he will not be denied. He has *claimed* you.'

'None have claimed me!' snarled Mortarion. 'Even my Father could not claim me! Me, who was guilty of patricide long before the seeds of treachery were sown in the Warmaster's heart. I have seen them all off – the tyrants, the witches, the xenos filth. Only *I* remain – pure of it all, free of corruption.'

'You do not look pure to me.'

The primarch glowered. 'I can compel you, daemon. I know the words, the numerical constants that bind you, dragging you from one form to another. I have studied these things. It is not witchery, but scientific reason.'

Lermenta felt real contempt then. The damaged figure before her had no true knowledge, just false hopes and gleanings. Her own master's favourite, Magnus – ah, now there was one who *really* understood the mysteries of the empyrean, and even he had been deceived.

'You wish to know the truth?' she asked.

Mortarion came closer. 'I *will* know the truth,' he hissed.

'I can show it to you.'

'I destroyed a world to find you. Give me the knowledge.'

Lermenta smiled sweetly. 'Very well.'

Exerting her power was trivially easy. Most of the wards and cantrips Mortarion had assembled to keep her in place were embarrassingly weak, and only one thing in the chamber had the power to really hurt her.

'*This* is the truth.'

Her bonds shattered. Her human shell peeled away, sloughing from her like a bloody cloak and revealing a glossy, insectoid true-form. She launched herself at the primarch, her jaws gaping obscenely wide, her claws raking.

She took him by surprise. It was her only advantage and she pressed it, gouging at his grease-streaked armour and trying to gnaw at the flesh within.

He hammered a heavy fist down, trying to take her head off, but she evaded him with ease. She punched a claw into his midriff, biting deep, eliciting a roar of pain.

By the gods, she was *enjoying* this.

His physical strength was enormous, but that would not help him, for she was a creature of anti-physics, shackled only by laws that he feared to invoke. She wounded him again, goading him like some huge taurodon, driving his anger deeper towards mania.

'Banish!' he roared as she laughed at him. 'Go back!'

His fists were flailing now, trying to latch on to her, to drag her down. She slipped through his fingers like an eel, bloodletting as she went, adding freshly scored lines to his already battered war-plate. The two of them rocked back towards the circle, and she felt the power of the wards overlap in the air, tearing at her flesh even as she ripped through them.

'Do it!' she taunted, slapping him across the face. ***'Do what you came to do!'***

He resisted, trying to tear her apart with his hands, still relying on the immeasurable strength in his post-human musculature.

Lermenta spat at him, and the acidic spittle clogged in his eye.

That did it.

'*Barbaroi!*' he roared, and the runes etched around the chamber flared into life. A hot wind suddenly howled from the centre of the circles, snatching at her revealed trueform and harrowing it. '*Gharáz! Baghammon'echzhaza!*'

She couldn't help but scream, though the pain was mingled with a cold satisfaction at what she had provoked.

Mortarion kept up the chant, and now his fist-strikes, spiralling with warp-lightning, caused real damage. He smashed her back against the iron frame that had held her, and the blows drove into her carapaced stomach.

'So it comes for you at last,' she hissed through bloodied fangs, grinning. ***'You could not resist.'***

The glorious stink of learned sorcery and hedge-magick was now pungent and inescapable. It *was* within him, and he was *using* it, in spite of every protestation.

'Never mock me,' Mortarion growled, spraying spittle from the vents of his rebreather. '*Heijammeka! Never goad me!*'

Lermenta sagged back against the wall, feeling her soul pulled back into the empyrean. The primarch was crunching her to pieces now, hammering furiously with his fists, pouring out all of his fury onto her broken physical shell. It was hard not to be awed by it – she was the first to see a fragment of what he would eventually become.

Here, above the burning remains of Terathalion, was the *future* of the Death Lord being born.

And so as she died, and her quintessential matter sucked itself back into the maw of the aether, she managed a mock salute. ***'Hail, Master of the Plague!'*** she cried through the ruin of her jaws. ***'By the***

gods, you learn fast.'

Then the mortal universe ripped away, and the warp came rushing over her like a tide.

Mortarion stood over Lermenta's crushed form, breathing heavily. He could smell the ichor upon his gauntlets. It wasn't blood, however it stained just as richly.

His hearts were beating as one, though the combat had sickened him. He wanted to vomit, to expel the curdling sickness that hung heavily in his stomach.

But here was something else there, too. He remembered Malcador's promises; the smooth words spoken, so it seemed, an age ago.

A day will come when all these things are no longer necessary.

The Sigillite had been wrong about that, either lying or mistaken. That day would never come now, and there was no point pretending otherwise. Perhaps all the old certainties would have to be overturned now, even the oldest, forged in the gas-clouds of the foundling world he had both loved and hated.

He remembered, too, the words that he had spoken.

I will never serve in your Crusade while there are witches among us.

For too long, he had been used by all sides – Nikaea had been and gone, and the promises made for it had all been hollow. The void now *seethed* with witchery, more virulent than ever, and he could feel its tendrils grasping for him.

He looked down at the etched floor, at the wards and the symbols and the runes. He would have to learn more. He would have to master all the paths of ruin. He would, as perhaps he had known for a long time now, have to become the very thing that he had always hated.

'So be it,' he growled, retreating back to the centre of the arcane circle. 'It starts here.'

Mortarion, the Death Lord, primarch of the XIV Legion

BLACK OCULUS

John French

‘Beyond the edge of the sky there is always another horizon,
Always a step further to take, always a new sun to see.’

– from *Verses of the High Age of the Great Crusade* (Canto XIX)
by Calus Quintus

I know you are there. I see you in the dark of your sleep. We have not met, and we will not meet yet. You cannot even hear me, but that does not matter. You don't need to hear to listen to the truth. So I am going to explain this to you. I am going to explain it because I can't show you. And you must understand, because if you don't then I will be alone with this gift. And that I cannot bear.

It began with three words spoken by the primarch.

'We go in.'

We.

Go.

In.

'This is my order. Carry it out. Now.'

I have to obey. It is my function. It is my life. I am the ship and its course. I go where I am ordered. The metal of the navigation throne was warm against my skin as I took my place. Sweat was running from my pores, pink with blood.

I was not alone. My cousins took their thrones beside me. They were slick and clammy to look at, like fish growing skins of slime under the sun. It took three of us, you see, three of us to pilot the *Iron Blood* as it threaded the warp's needle – one to watch, and the others to watch what the first could not watch. I was the first. I was the Navigator Prime, and in the warp that great ship belonged to me as much as it did the Lord of Iron. So, as much as it was he that spoke the command, it was I who gave the ship to the black star.

I sat in my throne, and the shutters pulled back from the viewing portal.

I saw the sun.

White sheet.

The sound. Glass edges ringing against each other.

Disc of night.

I was shrinking in my throne, and the black sun was swelling. I could feel sound buzzing up my throat. The edges of my mundane eyes stung. Acid tears were upon my cheeks.

We go in.

I open my true sight.

The un-light of the sun touches the black of my third eye.

And I see.

We were made to see. I am a Navigator of the House of Thal, and our House is but one of many. We are not human, though we may seem human. We are an offshoot, a creation – a deliberate reaction to necessity, if you like. Navigators can look into the warp and read its currents, and so guide ships over distances that would take millennia to cross while keeping to the laws of time and space. For this we are set apart, our genes protected, and our Houses given privilege. The third eye in my skull is a portal between the

madness of the warp, and human thought. My mind can look upon the impossible and not break.

I have looked upon horrors, and worse, and remained alive. I have remained myself.

That was, until my service to the IV Legiones Astartes led me to the black star at the heart of a wound left by the birth of a god.

Yes, I say 'god'.

What else should I call them? There is a limit to our consciousness, a limit to our understanding, a limit to our words. So I say 'god' knowing that it exists, that *they* exist, and still I know that the word cannot fully encompass what they are. They are the truth beyond the veil. They are the pattern in the warp that I could never see. They are what waits beyond the gateways.

And I saw them. I saw the heart of all.

The black star took us.

The *Iron Blood* slid into the throat of the darkness. Existence stretched, became a line drawn upon a black sheet. I heard the silence, and the silence screamed. Light became solid. The solid became sculptures of light and reflection. Numbers and dimensions, tumbling down from reality into the pit. A single instant, thinner than thought and longer than time, stretching on, and on, and on, until it became a sound that had always been there but that no one could hear.

Until it became laughter. An eternity of laughter.

And then it ended, and I was screaming in my throne of steel, and a world of sick sensation and cruel edges tumbled over and over and over. There were alarms sounding, and the walls were bleeding red. The crew were running. The ship was spinning – *thoughts, stars* – without direction. The medicae's eyes shouted – *shouted in fear* – as they rushed me and held me down and I heard words – *say 'alchemical formulae'* – and the words were puffs of red vapour in my sight. And then I felt the first needle in my flesh.

Red light. Machine screaming. Needles…

…and then silence.

I dream now. I dream beneath the waves of sedatives in a pit at the bottom of a murdered world called Tallarn. The sons of Perturabo keep me here. They keep us all here, all those who went into the black star with their eyes open. They wake us to see for them, to guide them to the end of the circle they wish to complete.

They think they understand.

They cannot, and do not, and never will understand.

To understand you have to *see*.

I see the shadows beneath the world. I spent my whole life as a creature moving through an unreal realm with the eyes of a mortal. Now I am a creature moving through the mortal realm with the eyes of a god.

And I always *see*.

I see now. Even as I hang here, silent and asleep, I see. I see you, son of iron, hiding in the distant dark beyond layers of earth and stone. I see you and I tell you secrets that you will never hear. And this last secret is my gift to you, a gift from the heart of a black star burning at the point where the mundane and the eternal meet.

Seen from here – from the other side of the skin-thin membrane of reality – you are not strong or weak, noble or cruel.

You are not heroes.

You are blind.

And the universe sees you.

And it laughs.

VIRTUES OF THE SONS

Andy Smillie

‘We are poor fathers, brother,’ I say to Horus’s armoured back. My brother’s attention is, as always, divided, torn between the twin roles of Legion primarch and commander. He stands at the head of his temporary war room, eyes fixed on the large hololith that dominates the wall.

‘How so?’ he asks without turning.

‘It is a father’s duty to educate his sons, to steer them towards a better path.’

Horus turns then. It is the first time I have seen his face these last few months. His brow has grown heavier, his eyes narrower under a burden that my words have done nothing to ease.

‘Look at what our Legions have accomplished,’ he says, gesturing to the hololith. He is a proud father in that moment, stood before me championing his sons. Across the display, the details of a thousand wars fought across a hundred systems scroll and resolve. The tapestry of information and tactical data tells of our sons’ unstoppable might – they are conquering worlds even in the face of overwhelming opposition. ‘Were the Legions not under our stewardship, they would have accomplished far less.’

He is the commander again. I smile to myself, wondering if even he is aware of how often he slips between the two roles.

I shake my head. ‘No. That reasoning is flawed. Our sons are born to battle – we did not teach them that. What they do in our names, and the name of our father, they do out of obedience, out of duty and honour. We use them as tools to accomplish our ends, but we teach them little.’

‘What would we have them be, if not what they are?’

‘Were we better teachers, we would be able to help Perturabo accept his place, or ease Lorgar’s mind. We could focus Angron and bring balance to Curze. Our limitations as fathers are doubly reflected in our failings as brothers.’

‘No.’ Horus’s voice was iron-hard, his resolve absolute. ‘We each have our part to play. The Emperor knew this and made it so. We are each of us the sword or the shield that He needs us to be.’

‘What of the warrior cast to the fighting pit who must wield both sword and shield?’ I ask.

‘It is not the weapon, brother, but how it is wielded.’

‘My point. We, each of us, only know how to wield our might one way.’

Horus speaks to me then the way I address my own captains: any sense of brotherhood hidden behind a mask of purpose and responsibility. ‘What is troubling you, Sanguinius?’

‘Nothing,’ I lie.

I tell him nothing of my visions, nothing of the Emperor’s palace burning with unnatural fire. I do not speak of my nightmares, or of the fear that my Legion will drown in its own cursed blood. What would I say? I cannot envisage any foe that could threaten Holy Terra, nor any catalyst that could send my sons as one into madness.

Of all my brothers, I had hoped that I could share my doubts with Horus. The sense of sudden isolation steals the strength from my voice. ‘Just a passing thought.’

I turn and walk from the chamber.

The memory of that vision follows me. It was a warning against shortcomings, a cautionary tale about trusting solely in one's greatest strengths. My vision spoke of my sons, and their failures. At the last Tempest of Angels – a ritualistic duel from the distant history of Baal – I tried to teach the most polarised of my sons something of balance. Yet even atop the duelling stone, when all else but life and death was stripped away, my teaching was lost upon them.

I sigh.

True learning only occurs when consequence forces a change, for we are selfish creatures and we cling to our ways like deposed kings clinging to the ashes of a failed kingdom.

It is a truism from my childhood, a saying passed down from the first elders. The words burn in my gut. Anger draws my hands to fists. Amit and Azkaellon – my sword and my shield. But at the blades of my brothers' sons, I will have them learn to be more than this.

Before the next Tempest approaches, I will teach them the virtue of the lesson.

Azkaellon

It always rains on Henvinka. An entire planet sodden by an unceasing downpour, its continents are turned to slurred mulch, its seas storm-wracked gulfs. The enemy hides in the planet's core. Tomorrow, our companies will descend into the depths of this place and bring them the Emperor's justice. Tonight, we stand upon a rig of steel and adamantium, a towering platform holding us proof against the perilous waves.

I remove my helm and feel the rain on my skin. Within a moment my hair is soaked through, slicked to my scalp by the downpour.

'Where are the rest of your warriors, Azkaellon?' My opponent gestures to the five Sanguinary Guard that have accompanied me here. Lucius, the greatest blademaster of the III Legion. His features are noble, patrician. Even blasted by the storm, his hair lashing in the wind, he looks as though he had been born to stand there.

Yet any beauty he possesses is ruined by the sneer that stains his face.

'I am in no need of an audience as grand as yours,' I reply, indicating the thousand legionaries of the Emperor's Children stood in serried rank at Lucius's side of the platform.

He smiles a barbed grin that holds no warmth. 'Your companies will hear of your defeat whether they are present or not.'

Lucius's confidence is not misplaced. His face is unscarred – a rarity for any Space Marine, even more so for one who has fought so many hundreds of duels.

I regard him carefully. 'Only a fool tallies the battles still to be fought among his victories.'

The remark twists Lucius's lip into a snarl. 'Perhaps. I suppose it is not beyond my lessers to have a good day.' He steps towards me, a casual swagger shortening his gait, and draws his sword. 'Unfortunately, Angel, this shall not be one of yours.'

His blade is exquisite. The slender longsword has a wire-wound handle that stretches longer than I would have expected for a blade of its length.

He catches me studying the weapon and smiles, flicking its point up with a flourish. 'It's an antique. The long handle lets me switch between grips.' He demonstrates, effortlessly changing to a two-handed grip and back again.

I frown. Among a Legion of perfectionists, Lucius was a *narcissist*.

He taps the hilt of his sword against the combat shield locked to his left arm. ‘Now, if you are ready, I would begin.’

I draw my weapon, a wide-bladed sabre in the same bronze and gold as my armour. ‘First blood.’

‘As you wish. First blood.’ Lucius performs a mock bow, and begins to circle me. He struts with an air of casual disregard. He plays for the crowd, mocking me as he tosses his blade from hand to hand, and shifts his gaze between the adulation of the Emperor’s Children and his seemingly forgotten opponent.

It is all for show. For all his posturing, he takes not a single careless step, never straying more than a handspan within my striking distance, and never without his blade resting between us.

This is no game to Lucius.

I hold my ground. I am in no rush. Unlike many of my brothers, I am not prone to bouts of… *enthusiastic* anger. I have nurtured the patience needed to defend my father, a being who in all likelihood will never need my blade to keep him. I will outlast Lucius’s hubris, too.

Ten more heartbeats pass.

The Emperor’s Children begin to tire of the standoff, their earlier jeering replaced by the begrudging silence of boredom.

Lucius’s eyes narrow as he senses their disinterest. ‘I was content to let you thrust first, to give you a fighting chance before I claim victory. But…’ He stops moving, a sardonic smile spreading across his face. ‘…we have only tonight.’

He attacks.

His sword is a flash of movement and nothing more, its length little more than an incorporeal spectre. Its bite is real enough, though. My hurried parries manage only to turn aside the truest of his strikes, defending the exposed flesh of my face against the tip of his blade. A dozen times he scores my armour. Were he to draw even a single drop of blood from my cheek, the duel would be over.

The Emperor’s Children erupt in approval with each new graze. Whooping, they stamp their boots in rhythmic applause against the steel of the platform.

Lucius breaks off. ‘It pleases me to find you have some skill. Dull victories bring me little pleasure.’

I feign distraction, concentrating on my breathing, careful to keep my breaths shallow and quick, as though I am in need of the moment’s respite. Lucius takes the bait. He steps in to thrust towards my leading leg. But his attack is overconfident. I ignore the feint, parrying his blade as it rises towards my face. I strike back, gripping my own sword two-handed and cutting down towards his abdomen.

There is no room for him to parry. He twists, turning into the blow, denying me the momentum, and braces behind his combat shield. My blade shudders as it connects, carving a rent down the length of the shield. I pivot, reversing my grip and stabbing my blade around behind me.

Nothing. I am not quick enough. Lucius has already sprung out of range.

‘Yes, let us give them a show!’ He spreads his arms for the crowd but his eyes narrow further and, beneath his preening exterior, his blood is up.

‘I tire of your voice, cousin,’ I growl. ‘Let us finish this in silence.’

I see it then. The ugly, prideful anger that churns beneath the blademaster’s still exterior.

Then Lucius twirls his sword in his hand, and another empty smile creases his cheeks. ‘We are not at war, you and I – why not enjoy these moments?’

‘I see through you, Lucius.’ His face hardens at my words. A ripple of anger ruins the corners of his eyes. ‘Your nonchalance is nothing more than a blade wrapped in silk. You remind me of my brother, Amit. His aggression runs as deep as yours. Though he at least has the courage to embrace it.’

‘The Flesh Tearer?’ Lucius barks. ‘I am nothing like him!’

I ignore Lucius’s protestation. Courage. It surprises me to have given voice to such a thing where Amit’s

temper is concerned. Yet my brother would not have suffered this dance. It is my turn to smile as I imagine him fighting this duel, bludgeoning Lucius's face. I can almost hear the crack of his skull as Amit's armoured gauntlet batters it. The hammerblows ring out in my mind until my hearts quicken in echo…

I see Lucius speak again, but hear nothing beyond the thunder in my chest. Defence, strategy, honour – they all pale into quiet whispers beneath the roar of my rising anger.

Lucius's mouth moves again. I reply with a snarl.

He makes to attack, but I move first. I charge forwards, my blade raised overhead. He blocks my downward strike, turns aside the reverse stroke, and steps back out of range as I lunge with a kick. I keep going. A sweeping horizontal slash, followed by another as my blade twists in my grip. My sudden fury catches him off-guard. He makes good on his defence, but he has clung too tightly to his position, allowed me to step inside his reach.

I am larger than he. Stronger. Now is my chance.

I let go of my sword and grab the hilt of his with both hands. Pulling him tight to me, I launch a thunderous head butt. But Lucius has the wits to lower his head, and I grimace as my forehead strikes the thick bone of his. Grunting with effort, I turn my hips and throw him, blade and all, across the deck.

'This is not a brawl!' Lucius's voice is still thick with frivolity, but his eyes burn in outrage as he leaps back to his feet. 'First blood is first cut with a blade. You will not bludgeon your way to victory.'

I advance on him.

'Have you forgotten something, Blood Angel?' Lucius grins and gestures to my gauntlets with his sword point.

I look down at my empty hands. *Damn my rage, I have left my sword on the deck behind me*.

It is in that instant that I find respect for Amit's way of war. It is harder than I had imagined, to lose control and yet still remain in command of one's actions.

'This contest is over,' Lucius sneers.

I keep advancing. 'Then why do you back away from me, blademaster?'

A look of confusion spoils his swagger, but he keeps his eyes on me.

I knew he would. He was far too experienced to fall for such an old lure.

But if he had glanced over his shoulder, he might have realised just how close to the platform's edge he has come.

My words have done their job. The single moment of doubt that passed through Lucius's mind, the one instant when his instinct turned to going backwards instead of forwards, was all the extra leverage I needed.

I lunge forwards.

I feel something score my cheek as I crash into him. My momentum drives us both over the edge. We fall, both of us together, my arms locked fast around his waist. Cries of laughter follow us over the edge as the Emperor's Children pour scorn on their champion's mistake.

'You have lost!' His voice is a desperate plea against the rush of our descent.

'I know.'

I smile and spread my arms. We tumble away from one another. I close my eyes and relish the calm touch of the rain as it follows me down to the sea.

Lucius had won the duel, but that was never the victory he sought. Admiration, the adoration and worship of his fellow warriors, was the prize he fought for. By the time we are recovered, the gash in my cheek will have healed and the moment of his triumph will have passed. His victory, like everything else on this planet, will have been washed away by the oceans of Henvinka.

Amit

We are victorious. We have slain the enemy and returned another world to the Emperor. I crack my neck and roll my shoulders free. For me, though, one fight remains.

I duck low under a natural archway, and step into a hollowed-out trench in the rock face.

If this planet has a name, we have never bothered to learn it. Such a task we have left to those whose concerns do not run as bloody as ours. We however call it Bask, and it suits the name. An undulating landscape, baked dry by the oppressive blaze of its four suns.

I follow the trench for six more paces. If it is straight, it is only because it is not winding. Irregular chunks of rock narrow it in places. The ragged stone scores my pauldrons, yet yields and crumbles as I force my armoured bulk through. The space I emerge into is almost circular, a shallow basin at the foot of a mountain.

Khârn is waiting for me.

Behind him, a limp World Eater, his white and blue armour scarred and rent, is dragging himself away down another channel in the rock. Khârn follows my gaze.

'A warm up,' he smiles. It is an empty expression, something to fill the space between the twitch of his fingers and the flicker of rage that tugs at the corners of his eyes, and his voice is a guttural rasp. 'To keep the blood from my ears while I waited.'

He was right. I was late.

'It could not be helped.' I say holding Khârn's gaze without apology. Sergeant Barakiel had demanded the honour of this duel. I owed him the chance to fight for it.

'As you say.' Khârn speaks free of menace as we stare at one another. 'I knew in the end it would be you and I who stood here.'

He and I are bound together by more than this moment. At my primarch's command, we have fought against one another in the duelling pits of the *Conqueror*, even as we have waged war together on this world for months. We have killed the same enemy and bled on the same earth. I see myself reflected in the dark of his eyes, and I am forced to admit that there is more. We have each borne witness to the other's bloodlust, to the rage that steals away all else. In truth, there have been days when, were it not for the colour of our armour, it would have been hard to tell us apart. Even now we both stand with the same unease. We are strangers to peace – addicts on edge, craving the familiar embrace of violence.

'This may be the last battlefield we share. I would not cede this chance to pit my blade against such an opponent one more time.'

Khârn grins. 'Few are the warriors who seek me out so readily.'

Above us, the slopes of the mountain are barren. This fight is between us. It is *for* us. My Blood Angels and Khârn's World Eaters will not stand in audience.

'This is a fitting end to our time here,' I say. Then my lips twist in contempt. 'But there is no honour in this. This is not true combat.'

Khârn smiles. It is as real as the sweat that soaks his brow. 'You do not disappoint, Flesh Tearer.'

Flesh Tearer.

It was once so rare to be addressed by that name by someone outside my Legion command. I was a Blood Angel, a captain. My name was Amit, and yet – like those other titles – it always seemed less fitting than Flesh Tearer.

'And no, this is not combat,' Khârn continues. 'So let us forge our own honour, you and I. Let us stand here as flesh and blood. Let us fight as warriors, and not symbols of honour or tithe.' He crashes a fist into his breastplate.

I nod.

Neither Khârn nor I speak as we strip to our undersuits, revealing scars that wrap our torsos like thick ropes.

'One shall stand,' I say, eventually, my eyes still fixed on Khârn.

'Very well.' He nods and extends his hand.

I step forward and grasp his forearm in a warriors' salute. We will fight until one of us cannot rise again. 'Let us see whose blood runs stronger, the Angel's or the Butcher's.'

Khârn's face twitches in furor even as I feel my own hearts begin to quicken.

Together, we approach the arming post stood at the side of the pit. It bristles with long blades and polearms. Crude clubs sit beside barbed flails. There are punch daggers, bucklers and everything in between. I choose a short cleaver. Its ragged edge is blunt, its blade thick and heavy. It will not cut or slice. It will break bone and tear flesh.

'A good choice,' Khârn mutters as he pulls an axe and a lumpen hammer from the rack. 'A better choice than the blade that your brother, Azkaellon, once fought me with.'

I stifle a smirk at the comparison. 'You will never find me like my brother.' I take a length of barbed chain and wrap it around my left fist. 'This fight will not long be fought at blade's length.'

'Yes. This will be painful and bloody.'

Armed, we ready ourselves five paces from one another.

I see only Khârn.

The howl of the wind, as it scrapes across the rock of the valley, falls under the roar of blood swelling in my muscles. My grip on my weapon is white-knuckle tight. My weight is forward. It is all I can do to stay on the spot.

I imagine the first moments as we clash, my blade knocking Khârn's axe aside to smash his arms. I see his face crumple as my fist thunders into it. I want to hit him again and again. I hear my hearts beat and his bones break. I see Khârn broken, and nothing else beyond it.

He roars, and charges me. I echo his call, a grumble tearing from my throat as I leap at him. His axe is high. I bring my blade up to meet it as it chops down for my head. The weapons ring out as they clash, and a reverberating ache shoots through my arm. Khârn's strength is fierce. I push forwards as his hammer swings low towards my thigh. I spear my left hand downwards, grimacing as his forearm collides with mine. I wrap my hand up around his shoulder and pull him in, dropping the cleaver to fold my elbow into his jaw. He raises his arm in defence, snarling as I smash into the meat of his bicep.

Weapons forgotten, we are a tangle of limbs scrabbling for dominance.

His head strikes my nose and blood fills my mouth.

My fist connects with his ribs. Bone cracks.

His teeth savage my shoulder.

My head cracks his jaw.

We hold our ground, suffering under incessant blows from the other. We are a mess of blood, sweat and saliva.

'You are holding back,' Khârn spits. 'Give me everything.'

'As are you,' I say, throwing my elbow up into his chin.

'I must.' His fist closes my right eye. 'Once the Butcher's Nails compel me, I am lost. Until they are sated.' Khârn pulls my head close to his mouth, and his voice is a blood-slick whisper. 'And they are *never* sated.'

'True fury cannot be manufactured. It is in the blood.' I catch the look in Khârn's eyes, and I know that I am wrong. For all its cruelty, my rage is a part of me; Khârn's has been forced upon him, an insult against

his flesh. His mind was not born to deal with such a thing.

I see Khârn then, lost to his Nails. I see it in the drool that flecks his mouth, and the pulse of his eyes as they strain in their sockets.

My left leg buckles as Khârn hammers his shin into my thigh. He strikes again, pain flaring to my hip. I snarl and dig a punch into his throat. The blow buys me a moment. I grunt in pained effort, and shoulder Khârn away, then pace backwards and recover my footing.

'You have… lost…' Khârn's mouth curls in a sneer as he advances. 'There can be no… *backwards*. We must go forwards.'

I stagger as his fist hits my ear.

He is right. The fight's momentum is his.

I struggle to defend against a series of brutal punches and kicks. My arms burn with the toll of defence. They will soon fall, and he will crack my skull. Khârn's mouth hangs open in a snarl that I cannot hear. His cry is lost under the roar in my head, swamped by the blood-red fog thickening behind my eyes.

No. This battle shall not be the one that claims me.

Khârn's knees drive up into my abdomen, knocking the wind from me. My vision blurs. The light of the suns presses down upon me, an oppressive glare of gold – the colour of Azkaellon's Sanguinary Guard plate. I find the strength to smile at the thought. My brother has never bested me in combat, yet he has survived my most wrathful endeavours.

I throw myself at Khârn, riding a punch that almost breaks my jaw, and lock the blades of my hands around his neck. He drives forwards. We topple.

Khârn continues to batter me as we fall. He lands atop me, pinning my torso beneath his hips. I cover my face with my arms in a desperate guard. He bludgeons them with fists and elbows in a frenzied attempt to get at my skull. He lands a blow with every beat of my hearts. I roar in frustration, swallowing my every instinct, all of them demanding that I hit back. If I move my arms now, I am dead. He will smash my skull open upon the rock as surely as the suns will bake my blood dry.

I wait while Khârn strikes again and again.

His rage is not coordinated. Left does not follow right in an economy of motion. Right follows right follows right. The gap between strikes lengthens as the favoured limb tires.

Khârn attacks. I wait.

Another blow. More pain. I wait.

A slew of incoherent curses tears from Khârn's throat. He strikes again. I wait.

He strikes.

I counter.

I hook my left arm over his right and pin it against his body, as I throw my weight up. We roll. This time, I'm on top of him. Khârn hasn't registered the reversal. I have a moment's clear shot.

I hit him. The blow dents his cheek, breaks my fist, and leaves blood pooling under his skull on the rock. I drop my weight behind an elbow and collapse onto his face. Bone breaks. I ignore the pain in my ribs as he lands a series of wild punches, and grab his head with both hands. I growl, smashing it into the ground.

Khârn lies still. I slump away from him.

I hear the roar of my blood rolling and crashing like a distant wave. It begs me to rise. I cannot.

The words fall from my lips. 'A draw.'

Cruel laughter rumbles in Khârn's throat. 'There can be… no such outcome. Our fight is… not over…'

'It is for today.'

'Finish it.'

I ignore him, and close my eyes. *I see only Khârn, and the World Eater wears my face.*

The Tempest

It is the ninth day of the ninth month. The Tempest of Angels is upon us. I stand in the centre of the duelling stone and await my sons. It has been a year since I have seen either Amit or Azkaellon, not since I sent them to face Lucius and Khârn. I turn my gaze to the twin statues of the Emperor set above the chamber's main archway. Between them burns a single, blood-red candle. The pillar of wax is almost gone. When the last of it has burned down, the Tempest will begin.

For a hundred heartbeats, I watch the flame. It stands upright in the still air of the room. Only at its last does it waver. I watch as it flickers and fades. A moment more and it will burn its last. It is the same moment in which it burns brightest.

Then my thoughts turn to my sons, and my mood diminishes just as the candle has. I think of my Angels and their fury as they war across the stars. I wonder for how long such a fire will keep them from the darkness in their blood. Foreboding threatens to steal all strength from my limbs as I ponder my sons' final moments, and the terrible loss that such a time will bring.

'Lord Sanguinius.'

The strength in Amit's voice breaks my reverie. I remind myself that the flame is still lit. The destiny of my bloodline will unfold – if I am to be more than a mere observer, my focus must be on guiding them now.

I turn to find him stood under the eastern archway, a ragged frame of dark brass and jagged iron. He neither bows nor salutes, for there is no honour in this place. Only life and death, and the moments that act as passage from one to the other.

He has come as the Blood Seeker. The attacker, the destroyer. A role I have never doubted he was born for. I sigh.

'Lord Sanguinius.'

Azkaellon's voice sounds from the opposite side of the chamber. I do not turn to greet him. He stands as the Saviour. My defender.

I feel my limbs swell with anger in the same moment that my hearts grow heavy.

I have failed. The lesson has gone unlearned.

They have come to play the same roles that they always do.

I wait, motionless, while they step onto the duelling stone and ready their blades. I nod for them to begin, and close my eyes. I have no wish to watch this same dance again.

I am barely aware of their actions as they clash around me. Azkaellon will never let Amit's blade strike me, and the Flesh Tearer will never stop trying. My mind begins to wander, to slip away down the threads of thought, until–

The familiar clashing of Baalite steel, the background wash of the Tempests I have stood through all these long years, changes. There is something different in the tempo this time.

Something in the cadence of the fight.

I open my eyes to find Amit wrong-footed, his attack beaten back by Azkaellon's savage counter. I hide a smile as Azkaellon presses this advantage, each sweep of his blade more furious than the last. Amit remains composed, turning aside Azkaellon's blows until he finds an opening. Amit's strike is exacting. Azkaellon only just stops his blade as it drives toward my abdomen. I watch now with keen interest.

But the break in the normal rhythm of the pair is fleeting, and they return to their natures by the next sword stroke. Amit attacks with pure aggression, sacrificing his guard for a chance at victory. Azkaellon, his composure regained, strikes with direct poise, unwilling to throw himself off balance for a kill stroke. Yet, as the duel progresses, there are moments when the tempo is altered again, and in each of them I see a

glimmer of the other.

I was wrong to have expected these two to switch roles. Horus was right – we are who we are.

But we can be tempered. Our flaws rounded off by the virtues of our brothers. I know hope then. It is as a third heart in my breast, beating in slow time as it waits for the chance to race, to pump a glorious future through my veins.

I have seen too much of the possible ends to believe that it is glory awaiting me and my lineage. Yet the weight of certainty is not crushing, for when the day comes when my sons each fall to the darkness in their blood, I hope that the virtues of those they stand beside will keep them in the light.

THE LAUREL OF DEFIANCE

Guy Haley

They called him the killer of Titans.

Lucretius Corvo did not care for the title. He was captain of the 90th Company of the XIII Legion. That was honour enough for him.

In Martial Square, Corvo stood with the veterans of the Shadow Crusade and the atrocity at Calth. Ten files of thirteen: officers, battle-brothers and neophytes ordered without deference to rank. They were joined by brotherhood of a kind that transcended the boundaries of Chapter, station and company.

Inhumanly large and resplendent in their battleplate, they scintillated in the bright sun of Macragge, their badges of service and recognition crisp with fresh paint. Many times Corvo had stood in noble assemblage with his brothers, but never in one quite like this.

Once uniform in everything, the hammers of war had wrought the Ultramarines variously, beating out a different tune on each of them. Armour of differing marks mixed in their ranks and within individual sets. Battle salvage and worn elements had been lovingly restored by the Legion artisans rather than replaced. Commendation studs, non-regulation weaponry and unique war-plate revealed the identity of their wearer for all to see. Personal foibles sanctioned and let speak of *victory, victory, victory!*

They bore the marks of their actions proudly. They had prevailed against all odds, and they were to be honoured for it.

Amongst this august company, Corvo nevertheless stood out. He was taller than many of his gene-kin – that was a factor, yes, as was the massive suit of Mark III armour that singled him out as a void-war specialist. But it was the unique nature of his colours that set him truly apart. The cobalt-blue of his plate was quartered with bone-white. His personal banner, hanging from a pole mounted on his power plant, was likewise divided. It bore the emblems of the Ninth Chapter and the 90th Company. In the top left field was a spiked, hollow circle: a dark blue starburst.

This was not of Legion origin.

Serried ranks filled the rest of the square, representatives of every military force currently on Macragge – three Legions, the Imperial Army, and others. At the north and south, a pair of Warlord Titans stood sentinel. The eyes of millions of citizens watched the ceremony, hundreds of thousands in the vast crowds beyond the square alone. They were quiet. All of Macragge listened respectfully.

Three primarchs occupied a grand dais beneath the massive Propylae Titanicum.

Sanguinius stood forward and centre as befitted his status as Imperial Regent. He shone with his customary radiance, but appeared troubled even so. He said little, and the enigmatic Lion El'Jonson even less. Today was their brother Roboute Guilliman's day – the master of Ultramar and the XIII Legion. Today the sacrifices of his realm, his people, were to be remembered. His words boomed out across the square – dozens of names, dozens of victories, dozens of heroes born from the horrors of defeat.

Guilliman honoured the unenhanced first, scores of mortal men and women who had defied the traitors, whether by lasgun and blade, or through acts of less obvious heroism: a scholam mistress who had led

three hundred children to safety, a fabricatory adept who had worked for ten days without rest when his fellows had fled, and the sole survivor of a hundred port workers who had marched their industrial loaders into the enemy.

The Legiones Astartes waited motionless in the sun. Hours passed. The bulk of the southern Titan draped Corvo in welcome shadow for a while, but soon enough he was in the sun's full glare again. Half the standard humans had yet to be feted.

The sun was westering when the last bowed before the giant lords of men and walked away. A scroll was unfurled by Guilliman's equerry. Now it was time for the Ultramarines to pay respect to their brothers.

These were the champions of Ultramar.

The first name was read out. Honours were stated and bestowed. Short words from the primarch. The receiver renewed his oaths of loyalty. He was only the first to do so.

Corvo's hands twitched.

The night before. With Guilliman there was always a night before, or a night after. Feasts and parties went with his honour-giving like bolts went with boltguns. He held it important for his sons to mingle with the citizens, another chore in preparing themselves for peaceful duties once war was done.

It was clear now that those days would never come. Corvo expected ambivalence at the thought – he was made for war, after all – but found melancholy instead. Guilliman's dream was fading.

The whole of the Regia Civitata had been given over to the function. Inside its baroque halls, the one hundred and thirty mingled with the common mortals of Ultramar. The Space Marines stood like adults in a room of children, but the two strands of humanity were, for the most part, at ease with one another. The primarchs were absent from the pre-feast socialising, a calculated decision on Guilliman's part.

Corvo wore a simple, formal uniform, like all those who were to be honoured. Even so, he carried his gladius and bolt pistol on a broad belt. Events of the last few months had taught the XIII to be cautious. Members of the Invictus Guard stood garbed for battle at the main entrance. Around the perimeter and on the roof, the Praecental Guard and legionary brothers of the First Chapter patrolled. This heightened security saddened Corvo further. As much as the captain disliked company, Guilliman did not. It was important for his lord to be comfortable among his people. Distance was growing between the shepherd and his flock.

A woman was talking to Corvo. He reminded himself to pay attention to her.

'So much heroism,' the woman was saying.

'War breeds heroes,' said Corvo, and immediately felt foolish. 'The larger proportion of them perish uncelebrated.'

The woman was not fazed by his bluntness. *She's used to this*, he thought. Some women enjoyed flirting with legionaries, though he could not fathom for what reason. Women had been a mystery to him before his ascension to the XIII, and they only seemed more obtuse afterwards. She was very beautiful, and finely dressed. It did not matter to him.

Theoretical, he told himself, *you're behaving like an oaf.*

Practical, he added, *you* are *an oaf*.

'Something amuses you?' she said. An ironic smile played on her lips, a smile that seem to say: *where is the power if there is no potency?*

'No, no. A memory, that is all.'

She looked at him expectantly.

'It would not translate well,' he said awkwardly. By the old gods, he wanted to get away.

Corvo held out his glass, an oversized thing made for his oversized hands. A server stopped – his ewer was fit for men, but Corvo's glass was fit for the sons of demigods, and the server used his full measure in charging it. The liquid ran up the side as it flowed into the bulb, the thick swell of it trailing a lesser curve of clear alcohol as it found its equilibrium.

Not at all like the wall of blood that burst from the coffin ship. Not like that in the least.

'That is some drink,' said the woman. 'If I were to drink it, I would not wake for a week.' She was trying for levity, Corvo supposed. She was not intimidated by him.

'Our lord is still at pains to make us feel part of humanity,' he said. 'A lesser amount would have no effect upon me whatsoever. We are supposed to be enjoying ourselves.' He tried to hide his irritation, unsuccessfully.

He sipped the drink. There was a hard burn to it. A good, strong Macragge pine brandy. Very fine vintage.

'Will that help you to enjoy yourself, good sir?'

'Only if I drink a lot, and quickly,' he replied.

The woman cradled her own glass in both hands, the drink untouched. 'Does it work then? All this, talking to the little people. Does it make you feel like one of us?'

Corvo looked over the gathering of humans and transhumans. They ignored the monster outside as they conversed and pretended that the sky was not red. They acted as if the galaxy had not been ripped asunder by fratricide, as if the order of all right things was not upset. If they could just pretend all was well, then all *would* be well. It was as much a pantomime as serving humans and giants from the same jug, or of pretending that their chairs were of equal size because they were made in the same style. He looked down upon the woman. She was so tiny, so frail. Of course it didn't work.

'I *am* one of you,' said Corvo, and tried his hardest to believe it. 'It is better not to forget our humanity in the first place, rather than seek to remind ourselves. That is my opinion.'

'We have all heard what you did at Astagar. I doubt any human soldier could have done as you did.'

Corvo's smile became fixed. She sensed his irritation, and formed an expression of concern. 'Oh no, no! Not just the Titan, sir. I do not talk of that – no doubt you are sick of it.'

She was right.

'I talk of your efforts in the rebuilding. I have family there,' she explained.

Corvo dipped his head in gratitude. 'If only I could have seen it to the end. I was recalled for this ceremony. One week to destroy Eurythmia Civitas, and two years later it is still not set right. And I fear it never shall be.'

'He is right, our Lord Guilliman.' She cocked her head, appraising him. 'You are as much an asset in peace as in war.'

'We strive to be so,' he said. 'Now, if you will excuse me, mamzel?'

'I am Medullina,' she said with a slight curtsey.

'Well then, Mamzel Medullina, I bid you enjoy the rest of the evening.'

Corvo dipped his head to her and made his way through the crowd of worthies. He was courteous enough to move with purpose, as if he had somewhere else to be, though he did not. He headed for solitude, offered by the tall doors leading out onto the balcony. It was hard to navigate such fragile beings without damaging them – not a consideration he'd had in some while.

The greatest luxury in Corvo's recent life had been preparedness. He only heard the true, appalling scale of what had happened at Calth later, but by the time the enemy approached Astagar he was at least aware of the treachery. Corvo set the operational mark running as soon as the Word Bearers and World Eaters

translated in-system, and his erstwhile cousins were met with a wall of fire.

Why they even attacked Astagar was beyond Corvo, his incredulity at the waste of resources vying with the outrage of betrayal. It made no sense. Astagar had little strategic or symbolic value. He had not known then that wanton destruction was the traitors' main intent.

The force that attacked was commensurately small: five battle cruisers and attendant support – enough to ravage a lightly defended world, no more, no less. Good theoretical, perhaps, but the enemy's intelligence was lacking. They reckoned without him.

Corvo was not supposed to be there. He was en route to the muster at Calth but had been diverted by a malfunctioning warp engine on his command ship. Call it fate. Call it luck. Corvo believed in neither. He was there, and that was all that mattered.

The manner of the enemy's approach told him they were intent on a ground battle. So be it. He landed his own men and ordered his fleet to run out ahead of the enemy. A raid cost the foe five Army transports at minimal damage to Corvo's ships. Satisfied that the enemy would thereafter have one eye over his shoulder, Corvo had his fleet withdraw. He would save the ships, if nothing else.

Astagar's modest orbital defences accounted for a portion more of the enemy's strength before being overrun. Light bombardment of the principal habitation zones opened hostilities on the ground. Corvo was appalled at this prioritisation of civilian targets, but had had the presence of mind to send the population to the shelters away from the city. When the enemy commenced orbital insertion over Eurythmia Civitas it was empty but for six hundred Ultramarines and the seventy thousand men of the Astagarian Light Rangers.

All this was in his report. Corvo was diligent. He put everything into the report, even the parts that he didn't believe.

Corvo was granted a brief respite. The balcony was typically grand in the Ultramar style, running all the way around the top of the Regia Civitatis's extensive arcade. Intimate groupings of couches were dotted about, coloured lanterns and braziers of cheerful coals at their centres to blunt the bite of Macragge's night. There were few people seated near them. Guilliman's attention to detail in all things extended as far as ensuring that light pollution from the city did not drown out the stars, and the sky should have been ablaze with distant suns.

It was not. It glowered a dull red. Only a single star burned beyond the lights of the orbitals and ships at anchor, and that was false – the Pharos, xenos technology illuminating Macragge from afar.

Corvo walked to the balustrade and looked out. There were only a handful of cities so perfect. There were prettier, certainly, and definitely livelier ones. None, however, could match Magna Macragge Civitas's perfect marriage of form and function.

He breathed deeply. The sight of such order gave him pleasure.

'The entire galaxy should have been like this.'

Titus Prayto of the Librarius joined him at the rail. He wore his full plate, his head shadowed by an ornate technological cowl.

'Librarian,' said Corvo.

'Captain.'

'And what is your role in this charade, Prayto? Do you not undo our lord's intentions, alienating the people as you stride about with witchfire in your eyes and your body cased in ceramite?'

'An assassination attempt by the Alpha Legion. Konrad Curze so recently at large, here in the city. The creatures from beyond the veil embraced and welcomed by our kinsmen? Alienation is the least of concerns.'

‘You are another watchdog then.’ Corvo offered his drink. Prayto took it carefully in his gauntleted hand. His armour whined softly as he lifted it to his lips and drank half of it down. He handed it back.

‘Call me that, for that is what I am. My talents and those of the rest of the Librarius help to safeguard our lord and his brothers. There are three of the Emperor’s loyal sons here, together. Such a target. The Pharos lights the way for our enemies just as it does for our allies.’ They looked up at the Pharos shining in the red sky. ‘And what horrors I look for…’

‘You will find none in me.’

‘I will not?’ asked Prayto.

‘Surely, you have looked.’

Prayto gave a little laugh. He did not take his eye from the Pharos. ‘I have. You are what you say you are, a loyal son of Ultramar. You do not say much, though, and you are hard to read. You are a closed man, Captain Corvo.’

‘I find chatter tiresome,’ he said. ‘I prefer to leave talk to those who enjoy it.’

‘You put me in mind of the Lion.’

Corvo shook his head. ‘The Lion is a master of secrets. It is in the nature of the secretive to hold their own thoughts mysterious, yet to demand the revelation of the thoughts of others. I care as much for secrets and revelation as I do for conversation.’

‘This gathering is a chore for you, then.’

‘It is.’

‘Each to his own. Be careful you do not appear too aloof or ungrateful.’

‘Thank you, centurion,’ said Corvo. ‘I am always mindful of that. It is the burden of those who share my mindset. Talkers talk, and they do not understand those who do not feel the need to speak. To sidestep their concern, we are forced to perform against our inclination, engaging in pointless discourse, while they prattle on and do not listen to what we have to say anyway.’

The Librarian laughed again, louder this time. ‘A joke from you, Corvo?’

‘I am not without humour.’

‘No, no.’ Prayto was silent a space. He pressed his hands onto the balustrade twice. The metal clicked on the stone. ‘I will not detain you.’

‘Speak what is on your mind. I do not have your gift, but I know you did not follow me out here to talk of man’s temperament.’

‘I did not,’ he agreed. ‘I came out because I have a sense of what you intend to do tomorrow. I would give you some advice, if you’d take it.’

Corvo looked out over the city. Warning lights winked on cranes over the Via Decmanus Maximus. There, a new proscenium was being raised. He wondered what kind of victory it was for Ultramar, when more than a hundred worlds had died.

‘I am not surprised you sense my intention,’ he muttered. ‘It is at the forefront of my thoughts. What is this advice you have?’

‘I urge you to reconsider.’

‘I will not reconsider,’ said Corvo. ‘Our lord will understand.’

‘Of course he will!’ Prayto exclaimed. ‘But your peers will likely not.’

‘My deeds speak for themselves.’

‘Our deeds do not always speak the truth for us,’ Prayto countered.

Corvo downed his drink and left his glass on the stone rail.

‘That is not my concern. Only the truth is true, whether people believe it to be so or not. That is all I care for. Good evening, brother.’

He went back inside.

The coffin ship was hit several times and came down trailing fire, damaged braking thrusters on its port underside guttering. A lance beam slashed down from orbit, missing the craft by a hundred metres and demolishing a tower block. The shock wave staggered the lander, huge though it was, and it yawed dangerously, functioning jets shooting intense bursts of flame. It struggled upright, drifting out over the Via Longia toward the city centre, where the buildings were densely packed.

It was coming down too fast. Corvo didn't think that it would manage to land intact. True enough, when it hit, it levelled entire civic blocks and sent out a wash of gritty dust that billowed through the dying city's streets.

'Report hard landing of enemy war engine transport.'

'Acknowledged, Sergeant Phillipus,' said Corvo. 'I'm looking right at it.'

The coffin ship's scorched umber bulk reared up over the buildings of Eurythmia, battered but still whole. Lighter enemy landers were following. Streaks of fire crisscrossed the smoking sky, more coming down now than going up. Corvo's interdiction emplacements were being picked off. He tracked the assault crafts' vectors, calculating where they would land.

'Tertiary group, divert to Mnemsyne district, south side. Looks like a major landing. If engaged, hold and await further orders. Do not advance, or they will be coming down on top of you.'

Acknowledgements snapped back at him. The vox was still crisp, but that wouldn't last.

'Squads four, seven and nine with me. Crassus, bring up the Shadowswords. Let's see what we've got here. If there's anything in that coffin ship still alive, let us ensure it does not remain so.'

'Theoretical, captain,' Lieutenant Apelles voxed to him from inside the command tank. *'You are in overall command, you should remain here, with me.'*

'Practical,' Corvo responded. 'I want to kill some of these bastards myself.'

No one argued with that.

'Redeploy Apelles, take the remainder of the men with you. Await my order.'

'*Yes, sir.*'

There was movement in the rubble and shattered buildings. Half of Corvo's total company strength was there. The thumping growl of multi-fuel engines roared up behind. Corvo's Land Raider pulled back, turned and headed away. Several squads of Space Marines followed it. Three super-heavy tanks in cobalt-blue moved forward when it was clear, their tracks grinding rubble to dust and tearing up the road surface.

Corvo's group set out.

The Space Marines scouted ahead, moving fast. Quiet fell for a few minutes, the space between the last weapon-strike and the first real ground assault. It didn't last. More and more craft streaked through the air. Plumes of dust rose where they landed.

'I don't understand this,' said Sergeant Crassus from atop the lead Shadowsword. 'They are not establishing proper beachheads. They're coming down all over the place. Where is their discipline?'

'Same place as their honour,' cracked Brother Ligustinus, squad nine's resident wit.

Corvo was also astounded at the sloppiness of the assault. He followed pict-feeds from the first dropzones – World Eaters rushed from drop pods as soon as they touched down, not waiting for their fellows, while the ragged Army units supporting the traitor legionaries seemed little better than a mob, pouring out of their transports right into loyalist gunfire. For now, this worked to Corvo's advantage. His lieutenants directed XIII Legion response teams and local Army to where the enemy was most numerous.

He had to leave them to it. He had the situation on the ground and in orbit to monitor. And now this

possibility of war engines…

Vox traffic increased exponentially, until it chattered incessantly at him: casualty reports, the constant repositioning of his mobile command centres, the status of refugees in their shelters. He dearly wished to mute most of it, sticking to the close-range squad bands, but he had to see it all. His visor was so crowded with tactical information that he was left with only a small, clear space to look ahead. His bodyguards Glabrio and Aratus recognised his distraction, and walked close by him in support as his eyes and ears.

A tangle of wrecked vehicles, burning trees and collapsed city blocks forced Crassus to take the Shadowswords a longer route. After a moment's consideration, Corvo had his men clamber through the ruins, heading right for the Titan lander.

'Sergeant Crassus, find a good firing solution for the Shadowswords. Squad nine, stick with them.'

Voxed assent. Fifteen of his men peeled away, falling back to join the tanks. The Titan-killers rumbled around on the spot and lurched off down a clearer street.

Corvo came onto the Via Longia, Astragar City's main avenue. The Mechanicum ship had landed perpendicular to the line of the city grid, its kilometre-long bulk scoring a fresh street through at least five blocks. The prow sat on the pavement of the Longia, atop a fan of shattered stone. Its high, humped back was crooked. Landing on such a surface without control had broken its spine.

The battle was becoming more fierce. A number of feeds went dead.

A moment later, Lieutenant Apelles's voice crackled on the vox. '*I've lost contact with Verulus. Fighting's fierce in the northern deme. He's probably dead.*'

'Acknowledged,' said Corvo. 'Assess situation there. Take command of his forces.'

Two command tanks left. Was it good theoretical to abandon the command bunker in favour of mobile targets, he wondered? This tactical situation was unexpected. No pre-existing theoretical told of how to slay one's own legionary kin. He was forced to innovate.

They moved up to the coffin ship cautiously. 'Be advised, Crassus, Apelles, approaching Mechanicum lander. No sign of enemy activity.'

They crept down the Via Longia, right up to the steaming flank of the vessel. After a moment's consideration, Corvo chanced crossing the front with a squad of his men.

The ship leaned ten degrees out of true, its hull battered by atmospheric re-entry and weapons fire. Flames flickered in the buildings and rubble around it. It was quiet there, the crump of explosions and howl of landing jets muted by the high buildings around them.

'Perhaps the war-engines are destroyed,' said Glabrio.

'I doubt it. I saw the same thing happen in the Coralan compliance,' said Aratus to the younger warrior. Glabrio had not been with the Legion as long as he had. 'Ships all smashed to wreckage, and the Titans came out anyway.'

'I don't see any sign that the doors are–'

Corvo held his hand up. His men froze, dropping into cover. 'Hear that?' he said.

A banging sounded from inside.

'Theoretical – the doors are jammed,' said Aratus. 'No Mechanicum support. The only practical for the engines is to batter their way out.'

'Crassus, get ready,' voxed Corvo. 'Are you in position?'

'*Via Macraggia is blocked, sir. We're having to push directly through the buildings fronting Platea Lata*.'

'You are heading for the Agora?'

'*Yes, sir. Should get a good line right down the Longia once there*.'

'Be quick,' said Corvo. 'Do not leave yourself exposed. There is not much cover there.'

‘Sir…’ said Aratus.

The coffin ship’s doors vibrated as something pounded at them from within.

‘Fall back,’ the captain ordered.

They dropped back squad by squad, retreating down the Via Longia. Away from the crash site the city was dusty, the glass from broken casements slippery underfoot but otherwise oddly untouched. A roar, like that of a trapped animal, rumbled in the guts of the downed transport.

‘That’s not normal, is it?’ asked Glabrio.

‘Tricks. Psychological warfare,’ said Aratus. ‘Some of the Titan Legions do it on compliance actions. Growls rather than war-horns. Scares the hell out of the natives.’

‘Get back,’ said Corvo. ‘Crassus, are you getting a good line here? Can you hear it? Something about this is not right.’

The clanging from within grew to manic levels. With a grinding of torn metal, a giant chainfist emerged from the doors. A spray of sparks and red liquid came with it.

Glabrio gasped. ‘Is that…?’

The doors were wrenched apart. A torrent of blood poured from the interior of the ship, slopping up the buildings on the opposite side of the street. A wall of red seven metres high bore down the Via Longia in both directions, staining the walls almost to the second storey. Fierce, animalistic howling rent the air.

The Ultramarines ran. Corvo was bowled over by the sheer weight of the flood, his men scattered.

The red wave subsided as quickly as had come. Space Marines were sprawled across the road, all of them coated from head to foot in slippery blood. Corvo wiped at his helmet lenses, his armoured fingers clattering off the conductive crystal. Red smeared his vision.

‘Squads! Report!’

‘By the Throne!’ said Glabrio.

The shattered frame of a Reaver engine tumbled out of the door, its cockpit smashed, limbs lifeless.

And then its killer came.

Whatever the monster was, it was no longer a Titan. Terrible modifications had been inflicted upon it. The cockpit had become a brazen skull. Long horns swept back from its brows over the lower edge of the carapace. It moved with a sinuous grace alien to its machine body. A long, articulated tongue of metal probed the air between sword-long teeth, a tail of similar material curling around its legs. The Warlord, if that was what it still was, crushed its mangled sibling beneath heavy feet as it struggled out onto the street. It wrenched itself free of the broken doors and staggered into the buildings opposite, bringing them down in a cascade of rubble and dust.

‘Crassus!’ cried Corvo.

‘*I’m still not in position, sir!*’

The Titan’s head moved back and forth, for all the world like it was scenting the air. It hit upon something, let out an unearthly, blaring howl from its war-horns, and smashed its way through the ruins, heading west and away from the downed ship.

Corvo, sprawled in the gritty gore of the Titan’s afterbirth, watched it go.

‘What have those fanatics done?’ asked Aratus in disbelief. ‘What are we fighting?’

Corvo moved around the function – room to room, hall to hall – as if he were clearing a building in a firefight. Dancing was underway in the ballroom. In others, large tables were piled with food. More Ultramarines were to be found there than in the dance hall, as was to be expected. His brothers knew him by reputation if not in person, and greeted him briefly and respectfully. It was some time yet to the feast and the arrival of the primarchs. He engaged in polite conversation with the unaltered where it was

unavoidable.

'They say you killed a Titan,' they would declare.

'Not I. My men. It was my men. And it was no Titan.'

Many of his interlocutors left disappointed. He would not be drawn further on the event. Let others tell their stories. He had no stomach for boasting.

He caught sight of Captain Ventanus – the Saviour of Calth and Guilliman's new favourite – attentively conversing with some functionary or other, a broad sash across the Space Marine's chest thick with fresh honours. His adjutant, a sergeant by the look of him, was engaged with another group of humans close by. Adoration and laughter rose around him. Corvo wished that he shared their facility for small talk.

He found a server and took both of the jugs of brandy that he was carrying. He consumed them as quickly as decorum allowed, enjoying the faint buzz of mild intoxication for the few minutes before his transhuman metabolism purged it from his body.

'Brother-captain,' said a Space Marine he did not know. The rank marks on his collar marked him out as a sergeant.

'Brother,' said Corvo.

The other legionary held out his hand. 'I am Sergeant Tullian Aquila, 168th Company.'

'Lucretius Corvo, 90th Company.' He grasped Aquila's forearm in a warrior's handshake.

'I know who you are, sir. I just wanted to come and greet you. I was caught in an engine battle at Ithraca on Calth. What you did greatly impressed me. Your action on Astagar is the talk of my company, or what's left of it. It would have been good to have you with us. If there were only more of you and Captain Ventanus's kind…'

Corvo held up his hand. 'Please, you embarrass me. We all march for Macragge.'

'We march for Macragge,' Aquila replied automatically.

'If you are here, then you too must have performed well.'

'So they say,' said Aquila.

'You do not seem convinced.'

Aquila looked pained. 'I fought hard enough, but I doubted we would survive. I almost despaired. That is not what the primarch taught us.'

'We all despaired, sergeant. What else could we have done?'

Aquila shrugged. 'But tomorrow, I will be honoured for my doubt as much as my achievement. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth.'

'If Lord Guilliman has chosen you for honour, then be assured – you are deserving,' said Corvo.

'Perhaps. But the doubt came first.'

'Without doubt, how can we construct a foolproof theoretical? Without doubt there is only arrogance.'

Aquila was mollified by this. 'Tell me sir, did you ever doubt?'

Corvo gave stared back, stony-faced. 'In truth? No. Not for a second.'

The mark was a little over six days. Facing stiff resistance from Corvo's forces, the traitors had laid siege to the city. Why they had not ended it with a single, decisive orbital strike was a matter for conjecture, but still they did not. Instead, probing assaults searched for the Ultramarines' weaknesses. They displayed none.

Corvo's subordinate officers gathered around the table of an empty bunker. Dust sifted down from the ceiling with each artillery hit above, covering everything in a grey shroud. Cogitators were choked with it, hololiths sparked and would not cast their images properly. The Space Marines were forced to rely on paper maps.

‘Theoreticals? Anyone?’ asked Corvo. ‘We have no engine support, and our heavy armour can’t catch it.’

‘It is wary of the Shadowswords,’ said Apelles.

‘And well it might be,’ snorted Aratus.

‘*They will soon be occupied elsewhere*,’ said Lieutenant Sextus. He spoke to them via vox, since Corvo would not gather all of his command assets into one place. ‘*There are signs of an imminent enemy armour attack. Since Verulus fell, they’ve been bringing their heavy landers in unopposed. They are mustering to end the siege and crush us.*’

‘I do not understand why they did not wait to land this engine until then,’ said Apelles. ‘Why send it in first? It is vulnerable.’

‘Is it now?’ said Corvo softly. ‘It moves faster than any war-engine I’ve ever seen. And it seems… indiscriminate in its slaughter. The enemy, my brothers, are not playing by the rules.’

Their muted laughter was cut short by a particularly loud detonation on the surface. Debris pattered on the table. Eyes flicked upwards to stuttering lumen strips.

‘If we can’t get the Shadowswords into range, how do we kill this damned Titan?’ asked Corvo.

‘It is hardly a Titan,’ Sergeant Domitian muttered. ‘Not any more.’

‘Whatever they have done to it,’ said Glabrio, ‘it behaves more like a beast than a machine.’

‘He is right,’ said Aratus. ‘Perhaps we should divert our efforts to tackling the Seventeenth Legion. Let’s take our chances that the beast is too stupid to act in concert with them. Kill them first, bring it down later when it is alone and vulnerable.’

‘What did you say?’ asked Corvo.

Aratus was taken aback. ‘I meant no…’

‘No, no, about hunting.’

‘He said it’s like a beast, sir,’ said Glabrio.

Corvo nodded. He brushed grit from the map. ‘We need to fell this Titan. It is a focal point for their forces – not tactically, but *emotionally*. It is a kind of idol, I think, to those Seventeenth Legion fanatics. I am certain we can lure a portion of their forces into the city to save it, should it come under threat. Once they are inside we shall destroy them. As to the Titan’s destruction, we are plotting practicals from the wrong theoretical position. This is not a machine, Aratus has that right. Not like any we have faced before. But we have fought beasts. And if it is a beast, then so shall we trap it like one.’

His finger creased the map at Konor’s Forum.

‘FELGHAAAAAAASSSST!’

The pretence of its war-horns had been cast aside. The Titan had a *voice*. Diabolic, but a voice nonetheless – a deafening whisper, the rush of stale air from an opened tomb. The name it uttered was not the one on the Titan’s identification plaques.

‘Now,’ Corvo ordered.

He watched his Rhino’s vid-screens as Astagaran troopers broke cover and fled before the beast. Each sprinted eighty metres or so before diving out of sight; troopers further ahead taking up the flight. The Titan’s head swung round, attracted by the movement.

‘Go, go, go!’ ordered Corvo. ‘It has the bait!’

‘FELGHAAAAAAASSSST!’

The corrupted Titan levelled its giant las-blasters at the fleeing troopers. Deafening thunderclaps rolled out as focused light cleaved the sky. Repeated shockwaves of superheated air blew out windows and flipped the wrecks of groundcars onto their sides. A handful of men were caught and incinerated. Others were thrown aside, organs pulverised by overpressure.

‘*Come on! Come on!*’ said Domitian, stationed in the forum some four kilometres down the road.

‘It will come,’ said Corvo. ‘Patience.’

A half company of the XVII and a selection of mismatched armour followed the thing. The droning chants of the traitors set Corvo’s teeth on edge. The sound was pervasive, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

But their fanaticism had made them predictable. Half of them broke off to engage the Shadowsword detachment. This time, Corvo had the tanks remain in place. The enemy would find themselves walking into an ambush.

His plan was working. Eager on the hunt, *Felghast* broke into a run, outpacing its supporting armour and infantry.

‘Sir, it’s moving too fast for the men.’

‘All troopers, stand down!’ voxed Corvo. ‘Fall back to muster points! Stand by to engage supporting ground forces. Strikeforce Alpha, prepare to assault siege lines at quadrant three.’ He turned to his driver. ‘Ready, Crassus?’

‘Ready, sir.’

Corvo watched as the Titan pounded down the street. A thousand metres, seven hundred…

‘Now!’ he roared.

Crassus slammed the Rhino out of its hiding place in a demolished shop front, cracked columns bouncing off the tank’s glacis as it careened onto the street. Corvo went out through the gunner’s hatch and aimed the Rhino’s searchlight at the creature’s face.

‘FELGHAAAAAAASSSST!’

The Titan let off a rattle of inaccurate fire, smashing buildings into ruin.

‘We have its attention, sergeant!’

Crassus was the finest armour specialist under Corvo’s command. He was a master of all aspects of tank warfare, but he was also a particularly gifted driver. He accelerated the carrier to maximum speed.

Ultramar streets ran long and straight, but slumped buildings had narrowed the Via Palatine. Wrecked civilian vehicles cluttered what space remained. Corvo was slammed into the hatch rim as the Rhino burst through the shell of a burnt-out tram. Colonnades crashed down as *Felghast* spat fury all about them.

The fog curled in vortices around the pursuing Titan. It was gaining.

A missile hammered into the road. The Rhino slewed along the blast front as Crassus fought for control.

Konor’s Forum lay ahead, a large market square paved in marble now thick with dust. Great idealised statues of the long-dead Battle King stood at each corner.

Ramps led down underneath, where the streets intersected the square. If *Felghast* had been behaving to tactical norms, it would never have ventured into the forum.

But *Felghast* was not operating to tactical norms.

A spear of light slashed into the Rhino as it entered the square, sending it spinning across the pavement. It crashed to a halt in one of the arcades running around the edge.

The Titan roared and then slowed, approaching its prey.

Corvo cursed. He dropped back inside the tank. Fire licked out of the driver’s cabin. Crassus was clutching at his neck and moaning.

‘Release your belt!’ said Corvo. ‘Squad seventeen, lure it in. Lure it in!’

Corvo kicked the side door open and pulled Crassus free. *Felghast* looked down at them, looming out of the fog like a monster of legend. Old gods help him, if Corvo didn’t actually see the metal nose *snuffling*.

A beam of ruby las-light connected with the Titan’s void shields, sending up an oily flare. The beast swung around to find its source, already firing.

Corvo dragged Crassus into the lee of a toppled column.

The giant foot of *Felghast* moved over the square, throwing it into shadow.

'Now,' voxed Corvo.

Explosive plumes ripped up the sides of the plaza. A rain of shattered ferrocrete pinged off his armour. He held his head down, shielding Brother Crassus. His body shook as a large piece of stone clanged off his armoured backpack. Warning indicators on his visor display climbed to critical, alarms sounded in his ears, but he blink-clicked them to silence. His power plant was compromised. Coolant jetted from the cracked left exhaust, and the bars indicating its level dropped dangerously low.

The rain of debris stopped. Corvo raised his head.

Felghast's uncanny war-horns blared in alarmed tandem with its voice. Machinery squealed as its torso twisted, trying to arrest its progress. Walking was little more than controlled falling – now that there was nothing solid to place its foot upon, *Felghast* fell uncontrollably.

The stacked layers of the subterranean spaces beneath Konor's Forum were open to the air, and the Titan's foot plunged into the hole. It roared in anger, its awful brazen jaws clacking. Weapons discharged furiously, pulverising the grand Administratum buildings around the ruined square.

Slowly, it toppled.

Corvo watched tensely.

The metallic tail of the Titan lashed backwards and forwards, sweeping up a storm of rubble as it raked the ground. With a whip-crack, the thin end of it wrapped itself around the pediment of the statue of King Konor closest to Corvo. The whole structure held, though it shifted at this new load.

Felghast hung over the precipice, and then it began to haul itself back upright. A daemonic laugh rumbled out from its engines.

'Stay here!' Corvo ordered Crassus. He mag-locked his bolter to his hip. 'Heavy support squad Calorem, hold. Stand ready to execute. Anyone else, with me!'

Space Marines came running from cover. To their rear, up the Via Palatine, gunfire rattled. The supporting units of *Felghast* were nearing, fighting running battles with the loyalist forces set to catch them.

'To the statue! To the statue!' Corvo roared.

He sprinted, his body and armour working as one to propel him at speeds that his bulk would suggest impossible. He charged at the pediment without slowing, slamming into it. The impact made his visor display fizz. Alarms sounded again as his suit's ruptured coolant system struggled to keep the temperature of his labouring power armour down. He ignored it, trusting to his superhuman metabolism to save him from heat exhaustion.

'With me, brothers!'

Others crashed into the statue. They pushed at it, grunting in effort, armoured boots skidding on the rubble at the square's edge. Brother Vestorious drew his gladius, leapt up, hooked his arm around the tail and hacked at the ribbed flesh-metal as he hung there. Molten metal spurted from the wound and splashed on his visor, but he did not stop.

'Heave!' cried Corvo. 'Heave!'

More Ultramarines hammered into the statue, but there was no space for anyone else. The newcomers pushed against their fellows' backs or dropped broken slabs underfoot, giving purchase to sliding feet on the treacherous ground.

'Heave!'

Small arms fire came in, pinging off their battleplate, followed by the deranged howls of the XVII's supporting Army units. Bolter fire barked in return as Corvo's rearguard squads moved up to engage from

neighbouring streets. Popping bangs rattled around the dusty fog as mass reactive projectiles detonated. The intensity of the firestorm suggested a larger force of traitors than he had anticipated.

'Heave!' shouted Corvo.

The statue jolted, spilling Space Marines onto the ground. 'It's going! It's going!' shouted someone at the back of the group.

Corvo's vox was a torrent of feeds coming at him from all quarters. He had no effort to spare for their ordering.

'Heave!'

The defiled Titan was still trying to drag itself upright, its foot pawing at the air, seeking solid ground. They did not have much time. His men brought up a girder, and rammed it into the widening gap, levering the pediment upwards.

'Heave, brothers!' yelled Corvo. '*Heave!*'

The statue lurched. With the sound of grinding stone, the pedestal came free of its foundations and toppled over. King Konor slid from his perch and shattered upon the flagstones.

Felghast gave out a withering howl as it fell. Its void shields breached themselves on the jagged lip of the pit, bursting in a storm of lightning that ran sparks over the Ultramarines power armour. It crashed down through the open sub-layers, bringing its armoured torso to ground level and jamming its weapon arms wide.

The Titan was down. One leg was splayed behind it, wrenched at an awkward angle, the other buried hip-deep in the hole. Machinery protested violently as it tried to drag itself up, but it could not. Its tail cracked back and forth in anger, catching three Space Marines and sending them crashing into the ruins.

'The tail! Get clear of the tail. Stand ready to repel ground forces.'

Shapes were coming up through the dust. Enemy armour. Corvo dismissed them – in the choked avenue they posed little threat. Poor theoretical, worse practical and XVII Legion idiocy as they raced to save their downed idol. In confirmation, a loud whoosh and clang heralded a rocket going into the side of one of the enemy tanks. It stopped dead, hatches blown, further blocking ingress to the forum.

There were other shapes in the mist. Power armoured. Legionaries. These *did* cause him concern. Still, if they were in the city, then they were not outside it, waiting them out. Corvo's plan was working. He had drawn the enemy in.

'Calorem, execute! Execute, now, now, *now!*'

At the other end of the downed daemon-machine, the heavy support squad advanced out from the shelter of a courtyard. Armourglass eyes caged by sloped brass brows stared hatred at the Space Marines as they approached the Titan's head. Carapace guns swivelled hopelessly. Its jaw clacked on the ground, seeking to bite. Heavy melta cannons were arrayed by the Space Marines, five of them, and set to maximum power.

The roar of the fusion weaponry was audible on Corvo's side of the square.

The Titan screamed. They fired again.

'That is not the cry of a machine,' said one of his men.

The scream trailed off. *Felghast* writhed in its pit, the crashing of its death throes drowning out the sound of battle.

Corvo blink-clicked his way into Squad Calorem's helmet feeds. He saw a cooling puddle of molten brass where the Titan's head had been. There was no sign of a princeps or moderati within what remained, nor any indication of a cockpit cavity – only a fibrous, organic mess shot through with bands of distorted metal. He clicked off.

'Good work,' he said, drawing his gladius. 'Move up to square east side. Prepare to engage Seventeenth

Legion elements. Strikeforce Alpha, commence assault. We march for Macragge!'

'Captain Lucretius Corvo! Ninetieth Company, Ninth Chapter. Step forward!'

Corvo approached the dais. Corvo knew no fear, but this convocation of demigods gave him pause. Sanguinius's glorious visage in particular was hard to look at up close.

He came to the end of the carpet, to the top of the steps, and knelt before his lord.

'Look at me, captain.'

Corvo forced his eyes upwards.

Lord Guilliman looked upon him benevolently, as proud a father as ever there was.

'For you, my son, there is great honour.'

He held out a hand. A man came forward, bearing upon a velvet cushion a laurel wreath, so cunningly wrought from metal that it looked as though it were fashioned from fresh-cut leaves.

'The Laurel of Defiance!' called out Guilliman. He held up the award for all the world to see. 'One of our Legion's highest honours. For the Titan killer, for the saviour of Astagar, for Captain Lucretius Corvo!'

Corvo bent his head. The primarch placed the wreath. It clicked as it mag-locked itself around Corvo's helm.

'The honour was my men's, not mine alone, lord,' said Corvo.

'You led them well, captain. By honouring you, we honour them all.'

An expectant air formed. An uncomfortable silence followed.

The Lion spoke. 'Are you not forgetting something, captain?'

'Am I, my lord?' said Corvo.

'All others honoured here today have renewed their oaths to your Legion, and to the Imperium. Will you not do the same?'

'No, my lord.'

There was a sound akin to a soft wind, the sound of a world gasping.

The Lion's face hardened. Sanguinius looked to his brothers.

'Are you a traitor, then?' asked the Lion.

Corvo drew his gladius. The Space Marines on the dais brought their weapons up, but Guilliman stayed them with a hand. Corvo held the sword high above his head, blade flat upon his palms.

'I do not renew my oath, my lords, for the oaths of an Ultramarine are forever binding. I am not like my traitor kin to renounce their solemn promises. I have sworn already to serve the Imperium, the Emperor, the Legion and all of mankind, and through those oaths my lords have my sword until death takes me. You ask me to renew that which needs no renewal, for the oaths of an Ultramarine are eternal. To speak them again implies a weakness inherent to them. And there is no weakness. Not in my arm, nor in my mind, nor in my word. I am an Ultramarine. I march for Macragge and the Emperor for evermore, as I have pledged. I need not do so again.'

A slow, gauntleted clapping broke the silence.

Guilliman. Guilliman himself applauded his words. 'Well said, my son, well said!'

'Insolence, brother,' muttered the Lion.

'Honour,' Guilliman corrected him. 'Captain Corvo, put away your sword.'

Corvo did. His primarch's hand fell on his shoulder.

'Stand, my son. Stand and face your brothers.'

Corvo turned, and saw the Legions arrayed in the square as the primarchs did. Behind the expressionless visors of his brothers, he knew that some faces would show displeasure. Prayto had been right. He did not

care.

'Do you hear his words, warriors of the Thirteenth?' said Guilliman. 'Listen, for he speaks the truth. The honour of our Legion is unimpeachable! We march for Macragge!'

The response rumbled out from the square, heavy as thunder.

'Return to your brothers, Lucretius.'

'Wait!' said the Lion.

Corvo paused.

'Tell me, I understand it the custom in the Thirteenth to allow captains to modify their heraldry, but yours is a bold departure. Might I ask why?' asked the primarch.

At this, an image flickered through Corvo's mind. The eidetic memory of the Legiones Astartes was a great gift, but carried a high price. It made all recollections that came before its bestowing pale and unreal in comparison. Another irony in a life of ironies, that every image of death seen by his transhuman eyes remained sharp, that every privation could be recalled and felt anew in painful clarity. He fought for humanity, while his own youthful experience of being human was reduced to sun-bleached flashes, opaque moments of dreamlike quality that could not be trusted.

He treasured them all the same.

This was what he remembered.

The forecourt of his father's house one hundred and twenty years ago. Bone-white flags snapped in the breeze bearing the badge of the Corvo line – a hollow, spiked circle. A stylised sunburst.

His father was the last to fly that flag. There were no male heirs beyond Lucretius.

Natural memory was imprecise but in its looseness was found the miracle of evocation, and it was far more emotive than the cold exactness of his Legion-gifted mind. Lucretius again felt his hair stir, he felt the goosebumps rise on his bare arms. Autumn was chill that year, and already the wind had turned to come down from the mountains. There was something invested in this recollection, so deep and fundamental to who he was as a human being, not as a Space Marine. Something that he had almost forgotten how to feel, and struggled daily not to forget.

His father knelt before him, the proud scion of an old and powerful house. Corvo had never seen him kneel before. Not even in the old picts from when Sulustro was taken back into the fold of the Five Hundred Worlds.

'My son, Lucretius,' he had said. 'You go from us, and for this I grieve.' He grasped his son's shoulders. His voice was unsteady. 'I am proud of you. The Corvo name will die with you, and still I am proud.'

Corvo could not speak. What could he say? How could he be strong for the Emperor if his father – the strongest man he knew – was not?

Corvo's father searched his eyes for a glimpse of the man he would never know. They stayed like this, his father's hands warm on his shoulders, the wind cold on his skin.

He embraced his son and stood. 'Go now, Lucretius. Be proud of what you are to become, but never forget who you are or what you were.'

'I swear, father,' said Lucretius. 'I swear I will not forget.'

His father smiled. Corvo had never seen a sadder sight, before or since.

The memory faded. He was with a different father now.

It was hard to hold the Lion's eye. Perilous, even. But Corvo did.

The Lion glanced at Sanguinius. They seemed amused.

'Well, captain?' said the Lion. 'What is the significance of your colours? Would you care to explain?'

'It is simple, my lord.'

‘Yes?’
‘I made a promise,’ said Corvo. He bowed from the waist.
They were calling out the name of the next hero as he walked away.

A SAFE AND SHADOWED PLACE

Guy Haley

Gendor Skraivok, the Painted Count, Claw-Master of the 45th Company, stood motionlessly on the command deck of the *Umber Prince*. He ignored the bustle of the ship's bridge crew and stared out through the last armourglass portal still intact. Ramrod straight, as if inspecting a flypast, he looked not upon a Legion fleet, but upon the remains of one – a filigreed junkyard of broken vessels drifting purposelessly against the raw, polychromatic fury of the aetheric storm shrouding Ultramar, framing it in twists of superstructure as delicate as ice patterns on glass.

It was a wholly depressing sight. Beautiful in its own way, he supposed, but Skraivok had never been one for beauty. Though the opacity of the window was turned almost to maximum, the light of the warp-born disturbance pained his sensitive eyes. Without moving, he shifted his gaze to look out past the twisting tendrils of the storm, into the deep night beyond the borders of Roboute Guilliman's pompous little kingdom.

What few healthy ships had made it to this place had long since departed. He did not blame them. There was an anomaly at the edge of the Sothan System, a midnight blind spot out past the Mandeville point, framed against the corona of the distant Saphir Cluster. It had long been a favoured rendezvous for the Night Lords, who took delight in plotting their murderous business under the nose of the Ultramarines. That odd, shadowy blackness remained.

But Sotha had changed.

No longer a backwater, it practically swarmed with Guilliman's miserable sons. As soon as the more functional VIII Legion vessels coming into the shadow caught sight of the streams of ships making their way to and from the planet – and the new orbital platform, and the babble of noospheric traffic – they had turned tail and fled back into the empyrean. The rest had departed one by one, limping away as soon as sufficient repairs had been made to their ravaged hulls.

Those that remained were the hopeless cases. The *Umber Prince*, Skraivok reluctantly supposed, was one of them.

He had spent many sleepless nights anticipating the wail of proximity alarms, but the XIII had not come. He had become as bored of waiting for them as he had of everything else here. But Gendor Skraivok reckoned he had a good idea, now, what the cause of all this increased activity was – and that it had something to do with the regular energy pulses coming from Sotha. Luckily for him, these emanations had made the Ultramarines, if anything, *more* blind to the enemy lurking beyond the reach of their sensors.

For now at least, this remained a safe and shadowed place.

Of the nine remaining vessels, only the *Umber Prince*, *Dominus Noctem* and *Shadow Blow* bore signs of activity. The rest were entirely dark, their reactors dead, legionaries evacuated. All lights out, they had become slab-sided shadows thwarting the stars.

Skraivok wondered what terrors now played out within those cold hulls. What petty princelings ruled over the serfs, now that their masters had removed themselves, in the dark of the broken decks? Did they

hoard dwindling supplies of food, air and water to support their impermanent thrones? He was sure that it must be so. If there was one thing Skraivok had learned in his decades of service, it was that humans always reverted to type, and that type was ugly.

Considering the irony of these half a dozen Nostramos-in-miniature gave him a certain amusement. It helped stave off the boredom, at least.

Lacking attitudinal control, the damned vessels were sliding into one another, their mass attraction pulling them slowly across the millpond-calm of space where, very soon, they would meet their final ends as an agglomerated mess of broken spars and mashed hull plating. He quite liked that idea. The collision was something else to look forward to.

He had been there for seven months. He checked the chrono count in his lens displays, as he had come to do almost obsessively, counting the hours of every day off with increasing annoyance. *Yes*, he thought. *Seven months of skulking in the shadows, licking my wounds. Marvellous.*

The *Umber Prince* had fared only slightly better than the dark ships, coming so close to destruction that it was no longer funny, and Skraivok was a legionary who found a lot of unpleasant things funny. His serfs had laboured incessantly to heal it. It had been an unconscionably long wait, and today was the day that would prove their efforts insufficient.

The *Dominus Noctem* and *Shadow Blow* were leaving.

He pondered then, with a twinge of unease, upon Lord Curze's fate. Before his own ship had torn itself away from the battle against the Dark Angels, he had heard that Curze had boarded the *Invincible Reason*. A good number of the Atramentar had followed. Skraivok was more concerned with glory than some of his kin, but that had been a suicidal kind of glory that he wished to have no part of, and the *Umber Prince* had ripped into the warp with its hull aflame.

And so, instead of the pyres of the guilty, he saw the plasma torches of repair crews as they went about their tedious business.

I have only myself to blame, he thought wryly. Out past the storm, the stars were a scattering of fractured diamonds against deepest black, and the ruined fleet hung under their unblinking glare. His hands tensed within his midnight-blue gloves, immaculate again; he had little else to do but polish his wargear. Arc-projected lightning skittered across their gleaming surfaces.

Nothing, he thought. *I can do nothing at all.*

Skraivok thought back to the boltholes he had favoured in his youth, running with the gangs. Hidden places where a fugitive might rest a while, until the search passed them by, though a lot of them turned just as easily into traps.

A cough brought him out of the slum-stink and the greasy wet of foundry-tainted rain – back to the bridge, back from one hole and into another. He honestly couldn't decide which was worse.

'My lord?'

Irritation prickling his scalp, Skraivok turned away from the hopeless view outside to take in the equally hopeless mortal addressing him.

Hrantax was old, and bald, and very, very tired. His black Nostraman eyes were surrounded by deep rings in his pale skin – in the half-light of the command deck, blemished skin and eyes blended together, to make them seem impossibly huge. His uniform was loose upon his body, a consequence of surviving on half-rations. The command interface he wore at the back of his skull was crowded with bunched skin. His insignia had been poorly amended – he looked like a sickly boy playing dress-up, a caricature of a man.

'Lieutenant Hrantax. I suppose you've another damage report for me?' said Skraivok.

'It is *Shipmaster* Hrantax now, my lord.'

'It's whatever I say it is, Hrantax.'

Undaunted, Hrantax continued. One did not survive in Nostraman society by displaying weakness. 'Your conference with Lords Klandr and Vost is due to take place soon.'

'Yes, yes,' Skraivok said impatiently. 'So get on with it.'

'Very well. If I may?'

Hrantax waited for no reply, and pinched the haptics embedded in his fingertips to cast a hololithic representation of the *Umber Prince* onto a nearby display. The graphic wavered uncertainly in the air before taking something approaching a stable form. A good number of the projecting lenses were broken, and as the image rotated sections of it blinked out of existence sequentially.

'We estimate that it will be three more days before the main power links to the Geller fields will be fully operational, my lord.'

Skraivok sighed loudly. 'This is getting tedious. I'm pretty sure I told you – by which you know I mean I am *absolutely* sure I told you – that you had until today.'

Hrantax looked the giant warrior steadily in his red eye lenses. 'Tedious it might be, my lord, but the progress we have delivered far exceeds our best estimates. I said fifteen days – it will be done in nine.'

'Fear drives men well.'

'Fear only goes so far. They have performed well only because of my oversight and planning.'

Skraivok stared at Hrantax. 'I should kill you. I could kill you.'

'Perhaps so, but you won't,' said Hrantax.

'Are you, then, immune to fear?'

Hrantax's eye twitched, his suppressed terror seeping out of him. Skraivok savoured it. The little man tried so hard, and it was a joy to torment him.

'Of course not. But you will not kill me if you want this ship approaching anything like void-worthiness within the next few days,' he replied, then added, *'My lord*,' with just enough insolence that Skraivok laughed. It growled out of his helm speakers sinisterly.

'So soon!' said the legionary. 'I should embrace you tightly instead. Or maybe now, after so many months in this pit, I am past caring and will crush your head just to alleviate the endless boredom...' He raised his voice up to a shout. '...of being *here!*'

The noise on the bridge, a bare fraction of the hubbub that had once filled the place, quietened for a moment. The surviving crew, all of them as hollow-eyed and exhausted looking as Hrantax, glanced nervously at the Space Marine.

Hrantax ignored his commander's posturing.

'Nothing on this ship was untouched, my lord.' The shipmaster waved his hand along the battered flank of the craft. The outline of the *Umber Prince* as it had been was sketched in a soft green wireframe, while what actually remained of the ship was painted in soft reds – pulpy marrow in a shattered bone.

'Thirteen per cent loss in overall mass, seventy per cent crew mortality. Sixty-three of three hundred decks are open to the void. Eighty per cent reduction in weapons output. We have come close to reactor death on six separate occasions. And yet we are still here, mainly because of my efforts. If your time has been boring, my lord, mine has been anything but.'

'I am so glad for you, lieutenant.'

'I am master of this vessel, Captain Skraivok.'

'Only on my sufferance.'

'And your sufferance is predicated on my competence, so if you want to rot here forevermore, I would advise you to finish me now.'

Gendor Skraivok laughed, but only once. It was both a concession to Hrantax's point and a threat. 'Three days? That is good news, I suppose.' He paused a moment, before adding grudgingly, 'Well done. But too

late.'

An insistent chime sounded in his helm. A communications officer approached, fear sweating from her every pore. She lacked Hrantax's mettle and did her best to ignore the Space Marine, speaking only to her shipmaster.

'Lords Klandr and Vost are requesting channels.'

'Fantastic. Everything's broken but I can still talk to those bastards,' Skraivok said to her. 'Fine. Put them through, full encryption. I don't want any of this getting out and alerting the bloody Thirteenth Legion.'

The woman swallowed – close to collapse, Skraivok could see. And well she should be. He imagined skinning her, and the thought piqued his interest. She looked like a screamer. But then, they all screamed on the skinning frames...

'Yes, my lord.'

Two faces appeared in the hololith, displacing the *Umber Prince* into a fuzz of collapsing light.

Captain Klandr, known as Quickblade in the 23rd Company, spoke first. *'We are ready to depart as agreed, Skraivok. Will you be joining us?'*

'Nice to see you too, "brother",' said Skraivok acidly. 'And you, Red Wing.'

'*Skraivok*,' Vost acknowledged him.

'*Are you ready?*' repeated Klandr dolefully. His long face always looked utterly miserable, although there was a touch more contempt to it than usual.

'Three more days, or so my loyal shipmaster tells me.'

'*Then we must leave without you*.'

'Seventy-two hours. Can you not delay? Three vessels are more potent than two.'

Klandr and Vost looked away from him. He supposed that they were exchanging glances, silently asking each other which of them would deliver the blow, although their projections looked past each other from his perspective. *Good news never follows such a glance*, he thought.

'*This war is done for us*,' said Vost. '*We have no primarch, no orders and no purpose. If we remain here, we will be destroyed. The Thirteenth will notice us soon, and there are a great many of them around Sotha. I have no desire to face them on such unfavourable terms*.'

'They will not see us – this place has served our Legion well for a long time before now.'

'*Sotha is not what it was, brother*,' said Vost. He was less stern in character than Klandr, and closer personally to Skraivok, if such a thing could be said of any Night Lord. His sneer was polluted by the weakness of remorse – hardly apparent, but still there.

'Such confraternity humbles me! Might I remind you that you cursed the others for leaving us behind?' asked Skraivok.

The ghost of a smile quirked the corner of Klandr's perpetually downturned mouth. '*That was them, and this is us. The Legion is finished, Skraivok. Perhaps, if we are fortunate, we might aid the Warmaster in some other, small way*.'

'But generally, it's every bastard for himself?'

'*It is the Nostraman way*,' said Klandr. '*We were foolish ever to forget that. We await the next pulse from Sotha to cover our departure*.'

'And that… the storm. You'll brave that, will you? I don't much like the look of it.'

'*A good job, as you are staying here*,' said Klandr. '*I feel our passage will be safe enough back through it*.'

'I'm glad you're so certain.' Skraivok shifted tack, his tone became more conciliatory, an entirely transparent sham. 'I don't suppose you'd consider taking me and my men with you?'

Klandr snorted. '*And have you usurp me, knifing me in the back on the command throne? You never were one to take orders kindly from others. There is only room enough for one captain aboard this vessel, and that captain is I, Klandr Quickblade*.'

'I'll take that as a no, then.'

The two officers' outlines flickered, a sure sign of their reactors powering up to full yield. Klandr gave him one last withering glare, and ended his transmission.

'For what it's worth, Skraivok, I'm sorry. We can't stay here any longer,' said Vost.

'It's worth nothing,' said Skraivok coldly. 'Nothing at all.'

'*No, I suppose it isn't*,' Vost agreed. '*Goodbye, Skraivok*.'

The hololith cut out.

Skraivok ordered all hands to battle stations, in case his erstwhile brothers decided to raid his vessel for supplies, although evidently thirty-one Claws of Space Marines were enough to put them off. Nor did they open fire, almost certainly to avoid alerting their ignorant hosts at Sotha than from any sense of loyalty. With silent power, the *Dominus* and the *Shadow* ignited their engine stacks and pushed off from the graveyard.

The XIII Legion were punctilious in everything. Right on cue, just over half an hour later, they did whatever they were doing on Sotha again, and the predictable pulse of energy washed out from the world.

It overwhelmed vox channels and astropaths both, just as it had every other time. Sparks rained down from poorly repaired systems. The dim bridge lumens on the *Umber Prince* flickered. A burning wash of light rushed over the Night Lords' hiding place – Skraivok's lenses dimmed, and the armourglass portal dimmed further, but it was not enough. He shut his eyes. The light seared afterimages across his vision, and he did not see Klandr and Vost's ships clawing their escape into the warp.

At least they had the decency to proceed to a safe distance beyond his own vessel.

'And then there was one,' he breathed. Only the *Prince*, and the dark ships bleeding their last into the void.

His eyes watered from the energy pulse. He lacked the energy to unclasp his helmet and wipe them dry. 'Recall everyone. I want this ship ready to leave as soon as we have the engines back online. Send armsmen out to the other ships. Restock our vessel with full crew. We're going it alone.'

'My lord.'

'And get me Kellendvar,' said Skraivok.

Hrantax hesitated. 'Nobody knows where he is, my lord.'

'Why not?'

'An error of judgement.'

'You know,' Skraivok jabbed an armoured finger at Hrantax, 'if you weren't the highest ranking officer left on this ship, I *would* kill you. You know that, right?'

'I am certain of it, my lord.'

Damn him, thought Skraivok, *for his impertinence. Damn him and Kellendvar both*.

'Just find the Headsman. Get him here now.'

Kellendvar pushed deeper into the man's ruined face. The wretch gave out a moan of pain, as blood and gelatinous matter wept down his cheek. Kellendvar's other hand gripped the man's shoulder so tightly that his collar bone cracked.

Kellendvar looked him up and down. So weak, so fragile. 'It is good that you stop struggling. You accept your fate. This is wise.'

'Please, my lord... please...' said the man, his voice a pained whisper. 'I have served the Legion

faithfully all my life.'

'No doubt you think this is not fair?' Kellendvar's face was close to the man's. He smelled blood, the humours of the ruptured eye, dirt and fear. He moved his finger just a fraction, the man gurgled in fresh agony. 'It is not fair. But there is no fairness in all the universe. Do you not agree?'

The man's only response was to choke out a phlegmy sob.

'So tell me where my brother is, and I will give you a swift release from the sins of this life.' Kellendvar's tone made it absolutely certain what the alternative would be.

'Which brother, my lord?' gasped the man.

Kellendvar contrived to look puzzled. '*My* brother. I have only one.'

'I have not seen any other legionaries since... since... Please, I beg you, release me!'

'No. I already said – not *a* brother, *my* brother.'

The man screamed. 'My lord, please! Please! He said he would flay me alive if we told!'

'I do not think that is of much concern now, do you?'

'Please, no more! He is in the Great Vault! Please, my lord!'

'Now, that wasn't so hard, was it? Be thankful, I will grant you mercy.'

Kellendvar pushed harder, hitting the back of the eye socket, which gave under the metal of his gauntlet like an eggshell. The man shuddered and died, his brains parting before Kellendvar's thumb.

He dropped the serf to the floor, wiped his hand on the dead man's roughly spun robes, and pulled him into the centre of the corridor. Unclamping the great axe he wore across his backpack, he set its energy field ablaze. A banging strike left a smoking gash in the deck plating and he plucked the man's head free to regard it. Kellendvar searched about for somewhere to display it and pushed it onto a broken lumen bracket before striding off into the dark of the dead ship.

Old habits died hard.

The *Nycton* had been the largest ship in the fleeing rabble that had made the Sotha rendezvous. It had burst back into reality and barely managed to bring itself to a halt. The reactor flickered out not long afterwards, and the ship had descended into chaos. Elements of two companies, the Impossible Dawn and the Deepest Dark, had been present. Rivalry turned into outright warfare, and nigh on a hundred Night Lords were killed in the fighting before some semblance of order had been restored, and then only because of the subsequent arrival of other vessels at the rendezvous. The *Nycton* was subsequently abandoned to darkness, along with its surviving serf crewmen.

But it took a long time for a ship to truly die. The organs might fail, the brain go dark, but life lingered long in the corpse before every cell perished – the stranded survivors digested their host as bacteria in the gut slowly digested a dead man. The great artificial star at the vessel's heart was extinguished, but power lingered still, running from auxiliary stations that would burn for a thousand years. There were many, many lesser machines that survived the death of the whole, enough to sustain a debased form of human life. Men and women might live on within the *Nycton* for generations, gradually forgetting about the galaxy outside.

Kellendvar heard the serfs rather than seeing them. Every so often, scuttling footsteps ran away from him, like rats in the walls. He made no attempt to go quietly, nor any attempt to pursue them.

'I could catch you if I wanted to, little rats!' he shouted. 'You know it!'

His voice echoed through empty halls and chambers, chasing down distant corridors where there were only the dead to listen. He laughed, and walked on.

Whole areas of the ship were inaccessible, and Kellendvar was forced to backtrack many times. Only twice did he don his helmet and force his way out into the void; the immeasurable, dark expanse of the cosmos always made him feel something *close* to fear. He was a child of narrow alleyways. He had never

enjoyed the sight of open space.

Within the hull, the air was laced with complex chemical aromas brought on by its burning. His neuroglottis processed it all, feeding him the delicious aftertaste of a thousand deaths. He walked corridors choked by blackened corpses, their twisted limbs and screaming faces carbonised into one, angular mass, so it appeared as though some multi-limbed monster had met its end there.

In the third concourse of the major throughway, he found the corpses of his battle-brothers, their armour cracked by each other's mass reactive shells. He looked them over with disinterest, seeking any he knew, but the companies aboard the *Nycton* were not ones he had ever fought alongside. Their markings and kill-trophies were unfamiliar.

In one great atrium, ruptured pipes sent cascades of water, coolant and human waste rushing down. In some places the artificial gravity had gone, forcing him to plod along with ungainly mag-locked steps, while in others the cold of deep space seeped into the deck, coating metalwork and dead flesh alike in thin layers of frost.

He went aft, now more than two kilometres from where Skraivok's salvage teams were hacking at the corpse of the *Nycton* like sea-scavengers devouring a whale. There, Kellendvar caught the scent of fresh blood.

Not long afterwards, he heard screams.

'Kellenkir...' he breathed. He shifted his grip upon his axe, and thereafter he went with greater care.

The serf had not been lying. Kellenkir had set up his lair in the heart of the Great Vault.

The relics of two centuries of warfare in the service of the Emperor had been smashed from their stands. Mildewed rags were all that remained of the banners of once-honoured enemies. Xenos weapons and skeletons were heaped in corners. Artefacts from dozens of scattered human civilisations lay broken upon the floor. Whether this was from deliberate vandalism or merely the punishment that the ship had sustained at the hands of the Dark Angels was immaterial – all sense of the Vault as a place of remembrance had been smashed by treachery either way.

It had become instead a place of horror.

Shackled bodies, all bearing signs of cruel torture, hung from every stanchion and pillar. The central aisle of the hall was lined by eyeless human heads. The air stank of excreta, blood, spoiled meat and burning flesh. Firebowls, torches and tallow-wicks of human fat gave the room a hellish light. What few windows remained unbroken were unshuttered, the view of the eerie, starless nightmare beyond bringing further menace to the vault.

Six crude cages lined one wall. Most were empty, but two were crammed with emaciated, filthy bodies. Chips of light glinting from their eyes betrayed the life that was still in them. Otherwise they were utterly still, resolutely staring away from the iron table at the centre of the room.

Chained to it was a serf in the last stages of death – male or female could not be discerned. Breath still bubbled from its lipless, eyeless face. The skin that had formerly clad it was folded with obscene decorum over an empty frame.

There Kellendvar saw his brother Kellenkir at work. He was as guilty as the next Night Lord of atrocity; true enough, he enjoyed it. But it was always to some end or other, not merely a pleasure in its own right. Such were the workings of his twisted morality.

What he saw in the Vault was simply gratuitous.

'Brother,' he called, softly.

Kellenkir answered without looking up from his work. He was naked, bloody to his elbows, the gore of his latest victim and the clean metal of his interface ports glittering in the firelight.

‘I heard you coming. You always were too heavy footed, Kellendvar.’

‘I have come to take you back. The *Umber Prince* is finally ready to depart. Time to put aside this idle torture and take up your weapons again.’

‘There is nothing idle about this. I teach these people a valuable lesson.’ He bent over, dug his fingers in between the ribs of his victim. It made a surprisingly loud crack, and Kellenkir’s unconscious plaything took two ragged breaths. Then, with a long, drawn out exhalation redolent of relief, the tortured soul slipped away into oblivion.

‘Skraivok is going to take your toys away regardless, brother. Come back with me.’

Kellenkir looked up. ‘Why? Has he killed his own?’

‘We were out of supplies. We were not sure if we would escape. Now, we need the crew. Leaving them here to fight for survival means we get only the strongest, and they’ll be pathetically grateful to be rescued.’

‘How very noble.’

‘How very *practical*, my brother,’ countered Kellendvar. ‘As the Thirteenth would say, at least.’ He walked to the table’s edge, his axe still at the ready.

‘We are no longer brothers.’ said Kellenkir. ‘This travesty of a fleet has fallen apart,’

‘You will always be my brother. You *are* my brother. We were born from the same mother, the same father. “Brother” is a word that means more to us than it does to the rest.’

‘Does it? What does blood mean, really? Nothing. Nothing is worth anything – not loyalty, and certainly not blood. Everything is worthless in the face of the night.’ Kellenvir grabbed the lolling head of the dead serf and, by brute force alone, wrenched it free of the neck.

‘Father would be so proud,’ said Kellendvar sarcastically.

‘Which one?’

‘Lord Curze. You killed our flesh-father.’

‘I did, didn’t I?’ Kellenkir smiled at the memory. ‘I remember so little from my time as a weakling. But I remember that.’

‘Come back with me. We will reave the stars together! Out there, that is where we should be, bringing terror to a thousand worlds!’

‘Oh yes? And how long will this dream last under a traitorous dog like Skraivok? Our Legion is no more. Those remaining are only the murder-gangs of dead Nostramo born again. We are not an army. We’re returning to type, hiding in the shadows. We’ll be at each others’ throats again before long. A man can only ever be the man he is, transhuman or not. We were fools to believe that it could be different, Kellendvar. The other Legions are right to hate us.’

Kellenkir tossed the head aside. It landed with a wet thump.

‘There is no civilisation, no justice. Only pain and deprivation. And suffering, and the blessed end of suffering. Surely this place is proof of that, if proof were ever needed. Why fight it? I will remain here, and bring an end to suffering and sin.’

Kellendvar shook his head.

‘Not all of the Legion is accounted for. We can rejoin the others, and fight on.’ He lowered his guard a little, to show his sincerity, but only a little. He knew that Kellenkir was one of the few who could best him in single combat. ‘Please, brother.’

‘Who is Skraivok to think it’ll be any better in the rest of the Legion? The Night Haunter is dead. There is no way he could have survived the Lion.’

‘We don’t know that brother.’

‘He nearly killed him the first time. The Lion is not one to leave a job unfinished.’

Kellendvar's face contorted. This wasn't going as planned. His brother was always contrary, but never so awkward. 'We're all we have, you and I. It's always been different for us. We're not like the others. Even amidst all this, we have that.'

'Nobody has anything. Nothing has value.' Kellenkir held up a pendant on a length of chain. 'Have you seen one of these before?'

'No,' said Kellendvar. 'Should I have?'

Kellenkir chuckled, and the serfs in the cage gibbered in terror at the sound. 'No, I think the likes of us not seeing it is entirely the point.' He tossed it over to his brother, who caught it in his hand.

The chain was sticky with blood. Kellendvar held it up. 'An aquila?'

'I've found a few of them wearing these as amulets,' explained Kellenkir. 'And on deck fifty-two, I found a whole lot of them together. They'd killed themselves. There was a bigger one of those mounted on the wall.'

'So?'

'So? You always were the stupid one, Kellendvar. It was a congregation, a *temple*. They're worshipping the Emperor. Hoping he'll come and rescue them. Imagine that! Imagine it sinking into their fragile little skulls that there will never be any settlement dues, no shift rotations, no alternative duties, pay or rights like some of the Legions offer. Just endless servitude in the belly of an Eighth Legion starship, and most likely a painful death at the end. This is *our* war, not theirs. So they turn to the Emperor as a *god*. The Imperial Truth!' he scoffed. 'How quickly they abandon it for a taste of hope.'

Kellenkir turned to the captured serfs.

'Hope is an illusion, life is pain!' he bellowed. 'And I intend to perfect its art.' He went over to the cages and pointed at one cowering wretch. The man fell to his knees, pleading – not for life, but for a clean end. With a cruel smile, Kellenkir shook his head, and swung his digit around to indicate another. 'You.'

He reached in with one hand and grabbed the second serf in a crushing grip. The man screamed like a child caught by a monster. The others did nothing to help, but shrank away from this angel who had become an ogre.

'I was afraid you would say that, brother,' Kellendvar sighed. 'But you are wrong.' He ran at his brother without warning, tackling him high. Kellenkir dropped the serf, who crawled away on his belly, weeping, and the legionary's face twisted with fury. He grappled with his brother, and both fell to the floor.

'How dare you!' He scrambled onto Kellendvar's armoured shoulders, squatting on his chest, pinning his arms to the floor. He smashed his brother four times in the face, each blow like a falling anvil. 'You are wrong! *You* are wrong! No one is coming! It will all end in darkness. It is the only way that anything ever ends!'

Kellendvar bucked under his sibling. Kellenkir was the stronger – he always had been – but he did not have the added strength of his armour. Kellendvar twisted, sending his brother sprawling, before rolling smoothly to his feet with his bolt pistol aimed at Kellenkir.

Something caught his eye in that moment. Through the windows, out in the void.

The glimmering precursor of an incoming warp translation.

Kellendvar spat blood from his mouth. 'Then brother, look, and see that I am not wrong.'

Kellenkir's narrow eyes flickered warily to the view. A tear appeared in reality, vomiting bright colours into the shadow of Sotha. Tendrils of semi-sentient light writhed out as a battlefleet emerged from the empyrean, psychic backwash boiling from its Geller fields.

A Night Lords fleet.

The *Nycton* rocked in the warp-wake of the vessels coming in, pitching them both from their feet.

Kellendvar recovered first. He dived at his sibling, a pain-spike in his hand. He jammed it into his brother's chest interface port. Devised to render a Space Marine immobile, its discharge blasted directly through Kellenkir's nervous system.

'One day, little brother, I will kill you,' Kellenkir managed to slur, before collapsing with a thunderous crash.

Kellendvar holstered his pistol and locked his long axe to his backpack. 'Maybe. But I am saving you first,' he muttered.

He picked Kellenkir up under the arms, and began the long process of dragging him back to the salvage area.

In their cages, the serfs wept.

Krukesh the Pale, 103rd Captain, a lord of the new Kyroptera, strode onto the command deck of the *Umber Prince*, twenty of his warriors filing in close order around him. Only when he reached the waiting Skraivok and Kellendvar did the bodyguard part ways, and then he stepped forwards. He had his helm in the crook of his arm, exposing his pallid, corpse-like face.

He looked around the bridge with eyes blacker than jet, an expression of mild amusement on his face. 'Well, Skraivok – you have made quite the mess of this ship, have you not?'

'Only because we did not run quite as quickly as you,' said Skraivok, who was painfully aware of the large number of fully operational vessels now crowding his limited view outside.

'Ah, ah, ah!' Krukesh wagged a finger. 'I am Kyroptera! I have gathered much of our scattered forces into something approaching a fighting Legion once more, and am here, it appears, to rescue you from this little hole you find yourself in. A little more respect is due me, Claw-master.'

'You are only Kyroptera by the say-so of Sevatar. That makes you no Kyroptera at all,' said Kellendvar.

'I am the one standing before you, with a fleet at my back,' countered Krukesh. 'By my reckoning, that makes me better than most.'

'Didn't the First Captain kill all the others?' asked Kellendvar. 'You're a dog on a leash, nothing more.'

'Perhaps you have a point,' said Krukesh with mock equanimity. He held up a finger, as if he had just had the most marvellous idea. 'I tell you what – how about I offer a place in my fleet to any of your warriors who desire it, and then leave you here to die alone in the dark. If I'm feeling sporting, I might contrive to let Guilliman's Thirteenth know of your presence. At least you'll have a glorious death. Isn't glory what you desire?'

Skraivok gave Kellendvar a warning look.

'Kneel,' said Krukesh.

Kellendvar unhitched his axe and planted its butt on the deck. Together, he and Skraivok got to their knees.

'Welcome to the *Umber Prince*, my lord,' said Skraivok through gritted teeth.

Krukesh accepted their obeisance with a satisfied sneer. 'Better. You can get up now, if you like. Now, who is this insolent pup?'

'Kellendvar. He is my Headsman.'

'And who is this one, in chains?'

Skraivok glanced over to a corner where Kellenkir was firmly shackled to a punishment post, furious eyes staring over a corrosion-resistant muzzle.

'That's Kellenkir. He was the vexillary for the Fourth Chapter,' said Skraivok with a pained smile. 'But he's gone... well, mainly insane.'

Krukesh looked incredulous. 'Kill him then.'

‘Ah, Kellendvar wouldn’t like that very much, would you, Kellendvar?’

‘No,’ said the Headsman, hefting his executioner’s axe.

‘They’re brothers you see,’ explained Skraivok. ‘Actual brothers, inducted at the same time. And Kellenkir is quite the warrior.’

‘I could have all three of you killed,’ said Krukesh. His escorts raised their bolters.

‘It is not wise to taunt him, Krukesh. Kellendvar is unbeaten in the practice cages by any but his brother. It’s why I chose him as my Headsman.’ Then, in a stage whisper, Skraivok added. ‘So you see, he’ll probably kill you first before he dies.’

Krukesh snorted, and let his threat drop.

‘This phenomenon you told me of. The Thirteenth are building some kind of super-weapon on Sotha?’

Skraivok scratched the back of his neck, worrying at the cable entering the neural port there. ‘Some of the others thought so, which is why they all sneaked away. Cowards. But I’m not so sure it is a weapon. It has an effect on our systems, but not much. It’s more… It’s more like a powerful transmitter array. Or a beacon.’

‘A beacon?’

‘You’ll see for yourself... *my lord*...’ said Skraivok with a total lack of sincerity. For the briefest moment, he got an insight as to how Shipmaster Hrantax must feel. ‘You won’t have to wait long. The Ultramarines are terribly conscientious. They’ve fired the thing three times a day, every day, for the last two weeks.’

‘Always at the same time?’

‘What do you think? It’s the Thirteenth.’

‘True enough,’ said Krukesh.

Hrantax cast a chrono-count up onto the hololithic display. A miniature version of the Sothan System sprang up beneath it.

‘Sotha anomaly in thirty seconds,’ droned a servitor. *‘Twenty-nine. Twenty-eight.’*

Skraivok watched Krukesh out of the corner of his eye. Looped holographic images of the captain’s favourite victims played over some of his armour plates, interspersed with the Legion’s customary lightning bolts in an endless exhibition of his past atrocities. His personal heraldry and insignia had been lavishly re-applied to his pauldrons. Fresh little affectations dangled from his armour – not just trophies, but cast representations of his Chapter, companies, and veteran squads’ iconography.

His helmet bore a new, spread batwing crest in blatant imitation of Sevatar’s own. So sure of himself. So puffed up by his survival. Skraivok had never liked him before, but this new Krukesh was detestable.

The servitor’s countdown ended. *‘Three. Two. One. Mark.’*

Skraivok waited expectantly. They all did.

‘Nothing’s happening,’ said Krukesh. ‘It looks like I’m going to leave you here after all, Skraivok.’

‘I don’t understand!’ blustered Skraivok. ‘It’s the Thirteenth! They must be up to something else. Wait, wait a moment longer!’

‘No, I don’t think–’

Krukesh stopped. A frown brought faint shadows to his pale features.

A strange foreboding took hold of every one of them, and even the crew-serfs looked to their displays and the one undamaged armourglass port in alarm. A pressure built in their hearts, presaging something dreadful.

Skraivok felt a tickling sensation behind his eyeballs. An instant later, Sotha burst into brilliant light, more penetrating than the rays of the system’s sun. The accompanying electromagnetic pulse overwhelmed the systems of the damaged ship, crashing cogitators, wiping out displays, dropping servitors and sending

the command deck into a darkness striated by the terrible, invasive light searing through the viewport.

The Night Lords shielded their eyes and winced in pain. The lesser men and women upon the bridge collapsed screaming to the floor, clutching at their faces.

Skraivok waited for night to fall again. It did not.

He lowered his hand a fraction, daring the light.

Unlike every other time before, the blaze of Sotha did not abate, but burned constantly. Seconds later, far too quickly for the light to have travelled by any normal, physical means, another light seemed to answer it from afar: a single star burning true in the sickly blaze of the aether-storm.

'Well, well, well,' said Krukesh. 'That, if I am not mistaken, is Macragge.' His spread fingers held up before him cast a hard black shadow across his face. 'How very interesting.'

Macragge. Sotha. What was the connection?

Then Krukesh activated his vox-link. 'Prepare the fleet!' he ordered, 'And gather my commanders. I think it is time for us to investigate this system a little more closely.'

IMPERFECT

Nick Kyme

Two embattled armies, their forces scattered, glared unblinking at one another across a white and ebon field. They had begun arrayed in perfect formation, their ranks orderly, their pennants standing stiff against a shallow breeze and the faces of their front rank fighters as hard as rock. Raised up on their circular plinths, their lords and spiritual leaders had looked on imperiously – Emperor and Empress standing side by side, displaying to all the strength of their rule and commitment to victory.

But as was so often the case in war, even with the loftiest of strategic minds, order broke down and chaos took the reins. For if one thing was certain about conflict, it was that it always ended in the reign of chaos.

War now blighted this hard, unyielding plain. It could only end in defeat for one side or the other. With the clarions of battle not yet faded on the air, much blood was spilled before one of their generals spoke.

'Do you imagine yourself as the Emperor or the Tetrarch, brother?' asked Fulgrim.

The Phoenician was leaning back and staring at Ferrus across the finely carved game pieces. He narrowed his keen eyes, easing himself forward so that he was level with his brother, who had sunk down amongst the pieces to contemplate his next move.

Unlike his more serious sibling, Fulgrim wore loose-fitting robes of pearlescent violet and his silver hair hung loose about his neck and shoulders. An ivory goblet inscribed with curious sigils sat near the tapered fingers of his right hand, adjacent to the gaming table. Fulgrim took a sip of the draught within – it seemed to invigorate him – before saying, 'I think you see yourself as the Tetrarch. Am I right?'

He toyed with the piece that represented the Divinitarch. She was a robed and blind seer clutching her staff of office, an iconic depiction of an iris within the letter 'I'. Or, in ancient Grekan, the iota.

Intent on his playing pieces, Ferrus did not look up. 'Are you trying to distract me, brother?' he asked, good-naturedly.

His tone didn't match his appearance. Ferrus was clad in his Medusan war-plate. Black as a funerary shroud, it looked thick and unyielding. His hair was shorn close to the scalp and his face might as well have been hewn from stone for all the emotion it betrayed.

Fulgrim leaned back, the light from the single phosphor globe above catching the porcelain cast to the skin of his face and neck. His long, lustrous hair flashed brightly in the lambent glow.

Beyond the light, there was only darkness. It made discerning the exact size of the chamber that they were playing in difficult. A low hiss did resonate on the cool air, though, suggesting at least a sizeable hall or gallery.

'Not at all,' he said, the slightest curl of his lip betraying both a nascent smile and the lie in his words. 'I merely pose the question – Emperor or Tetrarch?'

'Why not Primarch?' Ferrus answered, looking up from his deliberations at last to fix Fulgrim with hard eyes reminiscent of knapped flint or obsidian fire-ice. 'For that is what we are, is it not?'

Ferrus made his move, a cunning outflank with his last remaining Ecclesiarch. He sat back, arms folded,

looking pleased with himself.

Fulgrim laughed, a genuine expression of warm bonhomie that he seldom felt except for when he was with his brother.

'You should really mask your intentions better, Ferrus.'

'Should I?' The flicker of a smile manifested but was buried quickly under the crags of Ferrus's stern features. 'Who has a better mask than the Gorgon, brother?' he asked. 'Tell me that.'

'Now who's using distraction?'

Ferrus didn't answer, but merely gestured to the board with a gauntleted hand.

Fulgrim's face darkened a little as he noticed the armoured glove, but he recovered quickly. Who wears armour to a gentle game of strategy, he thought, though the shadows around them seemed to shift uncomfortably at the ire implicit in Fulgrim's unspoken tone. And the gauntlets? Amateurish.

'Does it bother you,' he said aloud, addressing Ferrus, 'being called that? Gorgon. An ugly creature, a monster of Grekan myth, so loathsome it could petrify a man by merely looking at him.'

Ferrus gave a short laugh.

'I see it as a compliment. Besides, I am ugly.'

They laughed together at Ferrus's mild self-deprecation. He only did it in Fulgrim's presence, the closeness of their fraternal bond evident in his apparent ease.

Even so, Ferrus still had to rationalise comment. It was his nature.

'My enemies held rigid with fear just at the sight of my stern countenance,' he said, sighing. 'Would that all battles were fought and won so easily.'

'Yes...' Fulgrim replied wistfully, his attention only half upon the board. 'Would that they were.'

He leaned forwards again, going to take a sip from his goblet but finding to his dissatisfaction that he had already drained it.

'We are friends, you and I?' he asked.

Ferrus frowned, slightly incredulous at Fulgrim's remark. 'Did I not forge your sword for you, brother?'

'Is that what friendship is, the forging of swords?'

'I can think of no more tangible a bond of trust than that,' Ferrus answered, his raw honesty difficult for Fulgrim to see. 'As warriors, we need to be sure of our weapons in battle. I would not let just anyone forge something I rely upon so keenly.'

'And so does that mean you trusted me then?'

Ferrus's brow furrowed in confusion. 'Trusted?'

'Trust. That you trust me.'

'You are my brother, Fulgrim. Of course I trust you.'

'And do you trust all of your brothers?'

Now the Gorgon showed his true face, a stern slab of rock that seemed to darken the light with the sudden severity of its expression. 'You know I don't.'

Fulgrim recalled the names. Curze, Magnus, Jaghatai...

'Then ours is a deeper bond,' he said, relaxing.

'Rare as the ore of Medusa.'

Fulgrim smiled warmly, forgetting for a moment where he was.

'How do you think two men like us became such firm friends when our humours are so very different?'

'We are far from mortal men, Fulgrim.'

Ferrus had always revelled in that. The idea that he was greater, more than just ordinary. *Perhaps my own demeanour is not so different?*

'Well, you know what I mean.'

Ferrus bowed his head apologetically. 'Are our humours so dissimilar?'

You're right, they're not. I am the master of mine and you... well...

'And does similarity really promote such a strong bond? Both Vulkan and I are blacksmiths of one creed or another. I respect his craft, but I do not wish he was sitting here in your place.'

Fulgrim leaned back again, seemingly satisfied. 'You are noble, Ferrus. I want you to know that.'

Ferrus smiled, his dark mood lifting.

'And you are still procrastinating, brother.'

'Just playing up to your pride.'

Fulgrim made his next move, opting to place one of his Citizens in a vulnerable position. It was an obvious strategy, and one Ferrus should see coming. But it veiled a second threat, concealed by the hooded board.

Their battlefield was circular – not an uncommon configuration – and divided into segments, each of which were made up of nexuses conjoined by the curved lines that gave the board its shape. Six spokes jutted from the main nexus, the core. Both primarch's pieces were currently arrayed around it, though not all were visible. The 'hooded' board meant that several of their pieces, predetermined before the commencement of the game, were held in reserve. When deployed, such pieces would remain hidden, represented as lowly Citizens, until such time as they turned or killed another piece.

The only other way to reveal the identity of hooded pieces was to use a Divinitarch. Ferrus had sacrificed his early on, deeming it tactically more valuable to manoeuvre his Tetrarch into a favourable position.

The armoured warrior piece, its sword held up in salute against its visored faceplate, had much in kind with its wielder's demeanour.

As Fulgrim released the Citizen, Ferrus gave a snort of admonition.

'I won't be goaded so easily.'

His thin, serpentine lips pursed. Fulgrim considered his brother's words but left the obvious rejoinder unspoken. Instead, he returned to the question. 'You still haven't answered. Emperor or Tetrarch?'

Ferrus smiled, engrossed in the board and the game.

It is good to see him at such ease.

Fulgrim studied him.

The angular cheekbones. The sweep of his heavy brow, each line above it like a fissure in the sharp crags of his face. The muscular jawline, peppered with dark stubble. The trunk-like neck. A pugilist's ears – ugly, small and misshapen. The mild discolouration of his skin from hours spent toiling in the forge. His piercing eyes, ever judging. Every hair, every stalwart tooth, every crease and scar...

'Blind Man's Fate is a strategy to use against novices, brother,' said Ferrus in his familiar rumbling baritone. Again, he moved his Tetrarch.

'Novices, or the arrogant pedagogue...' Fulgrim murmured.

'And which am I?'

Both. Neither.

'Let us see, shall we?'

Fulgrim brought his Divinitarch into contact with a hooded Citizen, and Ferrus was forced to reveal its true identity.

'A Fortress, brother? How intriguing.'

'Is it?'

'Only that, whenever we have played this game, you always favour an attacking strategy.'

Paying no heed and absorbed in the game, Ferrus took his Fortress down the board towards the core

nexus.

'Aggressive...' Fulgrim nodded approvingly, then made his own move.

Taking less and less time to deliberate each move, Ferrus swept aside the Ecclesiarch that Fulgrim had just offered him in a killing move that sent a flash of anticipatory triumph across the Gorgon's face.

Fulgrim tapped the edge of the table with his thin, sinuous fingers. His fallen Ecclesiarch had apparently dented his preferred strategy. The seconds lapsed, and he did nothing.

'Do you know why they call this game "Regicide"?' he asked, caressing the ivory stem of his white Empress, she with all the potency but none of the actual power.

'I care not,' snapped Ferrus. 'Cease this pathetic stalling and make your move.'

'Patience, brother,' Fulgrim chided him. 'Was Narodnya really so long ago that you've forgotten how to be patient?'

Ferrus looked about to snap again when he relaxed, plaintively holding up both gauntleted hands. Again, Fulgrim noticed them and had to stifle a tremor of rage beneath his right eye. A sibilant undertone cut the frigid air.

'What was that?' Ferrus asked, reacting to the sound.

'Nothing. Just atmospheric recirculation protocols.'

For the first time since the game began, Fulgrim looked up from the table and into the darkness beyond. He preferred it this way, especially when playing, as it tended to focus the mind. A hazy spotlight flushed the table and its players in sickly yellow. Just beyond this faint corona of illumination, penumbral figures could been seen in silhouette watching the contest unfold. They were still, rapt with attention as the test reached its most crucial phase.

'Death of a monarch,' answered Ferrus, his voice drawing Fulgrim's attention back to him. 'That's what it means.'

'It also refers to the death of an emperor,' the Phoenician countered, finding his confidence again as he marshalled his Empress into position. 'Not only that, brother, but the just and lawful execution of said monarch or emperor, following trial.' He licked his lips and the susurration from the atmospheric recirculation briefly intensified. 'I find it an intriguing notion.'

'Indeed,' said Ferrus, his attention back again on the board.

A trap was forming, his awareness of it evident in his tense facial expression. It also revealed that he could not discern the nature of the trap – only that one existed.

Still so blind...

By moving his Empress, Fulgrim had left his Emperor open to attack.

'Yes,' he continued. 'Intriguing that an emperor can be considered subject to the same laws and strictures that bind ordinary men. That any act of harm put to such a being can be considered lawful and just.'

'You believe it should not be so?'

'I believe it suggests that a leader, or even a father, can be flawed.'

'All men have flaws, it's what makes them men. The ability to see and mitigate one's own flaws is a measure of a man's greatness. Only good leaders possess such self-awareness.'

How ironic, Fulgrim wanted to say, but instead he said, 'Now who's stalling, brother?' deliberately turning Ferrus's earlier words against him in the hope of gaining a psychological advantage.

'I am not stalling.' Some of the anger returned, visible in the Gorgon's clenching and unclenching of his fists.

'Then act.'

'You are trying to hurry me into a mistake.'

No goading is required, dear brother.

Ferrus's gauntleted hand poised over the Tetrarch. One angular move, and he could kill the identical piece in Fulgrim's army. It was a move called 'the Swordbreaker' and in this version of Regicide it would turn Ferrus's conquering Tetrarch into a Primarch, a piece of much greater manoeuvrability and, therefore, power.

'You're hiding something,' he said, still wavering.

'And you're behaving distinctly out of character, brother.' Fulgrim snarled, baring his teeth.

Ferrus seemed not to notice. Instead, he stared at the board, wracked by indecision.

'Do I kill him?'

How many times did I ask myself that very question?

After making his move, Ferrus would have to withstand whatever attack Fulgrim crafted next, but with another Primarch at his side. He scrutinised the board, but saw no potential danger.

'You have nothing...' he muttered, smiling. 'As ever, you opt for obfuscation instead of a solid strategy.'

'Then show me yours,' invited Fulgrim. 'But before you do, answer my question. Are you the Tetrarch or the Emperor?'

Ferrus looked up, his face a mask of defiant belligerence.

'No one can be Emperor, save the Emperor himself,' he declared and thrust his Tetrarch forwards, killing the opposing piece and substituting for his new Primarch. 'As I play, I imagine myself as the Tetrarch.'

And there's the brother I know.

'Without pretension to rule, only to serve,' said Fulgrim.

'Just so.'

'And now Primarch.'

'Again, yes. It's your move, brother.'

'Becoming what you appear to be.'

'Is there not honour in that?' asked Ferrus, but his pride bled through in the words.

'Much. Dissembling is for less obvious minds than yours, dear brother.'

That was a mistake. Fulgrim hadn't meant to say that out loud. Perhaps he was not as in control of the situation – and himself – as he thought?

Ferrus scowled, annoyed. 'What is that supposed to mean?'

Words could not be unsaid, so Fulgrim went with them. With an open hand, he gestured to the board and the game in progress. There was a faint undercurrent of sadness to the Phoenician's tone as he made his final move.

'That you fail to see what is in front of you.'

The Citizen he had positioned earlier came adjacent to Ferrus's new Primarch and revealed itself to be an Ecclesiarch. Both of Fulgrim's Divinitarchs and his second Ecclesiarch were also adjacent. None could take the Primarch, for their specific permitted moves across the board combined with their relative positions did not afford this opportunity. They did, however, allow for something else.

Ferrus's eyes widened as he finally saw the trap. 'Too late,' he murmured, 'too late...'

You were, both of you. And too weak...

Fulgrim started for a moment, unsure as to where the thought had come from, but quickly recovered.

'This,' he said, tapping the place over his chest beneath which his heart was beating fast, 'was your downfall. Too rash, too eager. Undone by your anger, your arrogance. Are you so impatient, Ferrus? You speak of flaws, of the traits of great men. Are we not great men? So then, are we so aware of our own inherent flaws? Are you?'

Ferrus had no answer. He could only stare mutely, grasping for comprehension.

That was the second fault.

Fulgrim simmered with displeasure, but had to play this out.

'Why did you not heed me, brother?' he asked. 'We were bonded you and I, beneath the slopes of Mount Narodnya. You with Fireblade and I with *Forgebreaker*. Now, what has become of those noble weapons and the ideals we craved as we forged them?'

Ferrus looked up from the table, a frozen fist around his heart.

'The Traitor's Gambit?' he asked, not because he didn't recognise the strategy but more out of disbelief that Fulgrim had used it against him.

Anger. This was something that the Ferrus before Fulgrim could understand.

'You sound annoyed, brother,' the Phoenician hissed.

'Because you try to turn me!'

'I have turned you, Ferrus. You have fought and bled, wrought a piece with significant power for your efforts, and now I have taken it for my own.'

Ferrus shoved the table back so it jabbed Fulgrim in the stomach, and rose to his feet.

'Brother!' Fulgrim shifted backwards himself and tried to look shocked.

He is unravelling again, just like before.

'You dare...' accused Ferrus. He slammed his fist down on the board, scattering the pieces.

'I dare what? We are merely playing a friendly game.'

'You dare this?' Ferrus clenched his jaw. Fulgrim could hear his brother's teeth grinding hatefully, but he stayed where he was for now.

'How have I insulted you? Please sit down.' He gestured to Ferrus's stool, but it was upended and rolling away from the board now. 'Return to the game.'

'Your game,' Ferrus snarled. 'One in which you try to turn my hand. I am a loyal son of the Emperor. As were you.'

He reached for a weapon, but there was no scabbard at his hip and no hammer at his back.

'Perturabo has *Forgebreaker* now,' Fulgrim said with resignation. 'His anger towards me eclipses your own, brother, as hard as I'm sure that is for you to believe.'

Seismic cracks appeared in the Gorgon's stolid countenance as he struggled to comprehend everything that Fulgrim was saying.

'Where is Perturabo?' Ferrus demanded. 'Where is my hammer? Tell me!'

The ruse is over, said the voice in Fulgrim's head that had hijacked his most recent thoughts. 'I agree...' Fulgrim muttered sadly.

'With what?' snapped Ferrus.

'That this is done.' Fulgrim glanced to the shadows and the silhouette standing there. 'I am very disappointed in you,' he murmured, then turned his ophidian gaze back to Ferrus, 'And as for you...'

Ferrus seemed not to understand. 'Explain yourself.'

Fulgrim did as Ferrus requested, five words that drained away the Gorgon's wrath and left him stunned.

'You are not my brother.'

Savagely, Fulgrim gripped the Regicide table in both hands and threw it aside. The pieces clattered noisily to the floor, Emperors and Citizens alike toppled and slain in seconds. The game was over, and Fulgrim was revealed in all of his infernal beauty.

Ferrus backed away as the other primarch rose to his full height, dwarfing him.

He gasped, 'Monster...'

Fulgrim's reply was sibilant and insidious. 'I prefer exalted.'

Where Ferrus had known him as a being of immortal perfection, a handsome warrior-king of Chemos,

the creature that Fulgrim had become scarcely echoed that former ideal.

A purplish hue affected the pallor of his skin now, and there were ridges of scale in kind with Fulgrim's serpentine body. His upper torso and face still remained much as it once had been, though the eyes looked distinctly reptilian and sharp, needle-like fangs filled a mouth that seemed, at times, oddly distended. His legs were no more, his dancing swordman's gait surrendered in preference to the coiled agility of a viper's tail, the two limbs conjoined by some terrible alchemy.

Fulgrim knew his appearance well. He had often studied it narcissistically in one of his many mirrors. He had beheld it in the shimmering blood of his enemies. Seen it reflected in the eyes of those he was about to kill.

It was murderous. It was beautiful.

It was perfection.

Unlike this wretched specimen.

Ferrus was overcoming his revulsion, and bunched his fists.

'That won't be necessary...' uttered Fulgrim flatly, and sprang at him.

Ferrus roared as Fulgrim clamped his maw around the Gorgon's neck and bit deep. In a panic, those strong, gauntleted hands wrapped around his upper and lower jaws and tried to pull them open.

Fulgrim was spitting blood as Ferrus's carotid artery gushed even more vigorously. The Gorgon's grip was firm, his face a mask of pained hatred. Fulgrim raked him with his talons, tearing deep rents in his armour, but Ferrus clung on desperately.

Like a beast tamer wrestling his charge, Ferrus used the power in his hips to fling Fulgrim onto his back where the monster writhed and hissed.

'I remember now...' he snarled, blazing Medusan anger to meet his cold, iron hatred. 'Your betrayal.'

He slowly prised open Fulgrim's jaws like they were a vice.

'You coward!'

Fulgrim thrashed, unable to speak, seized by the very real possibility that significant harm might yet come to him. He twisted, trying to free himself, but Ferrus would not let him go.

'I should have killed you at Isstvan,' Ferrus said, 'I should have–'

He does remember. Everything, just as Fabius had promised he would.

'I...' Ferrus stumbled, losing his grip as he stared down dumbly at the thing that his brother had willingly become.

He remembered too much.

'You tried,' said Fulgrim, grief-stricken and slurring the words.

With a ferocious twist of his serpentine body, Fulgrim threw Ferrus off. He staggered, going down on one knee, but didn't move far. His trailing hand, supporting his body, scraped against an armoured boot. In confusion, Ferrus looked down behind him into the shadows.

He saw a figure there. Recognising its physiognomy, he looked back to his brother.

'What is this?' he asked, struggling with his ambivalent emotions.

Fulgrim righted himself and stabbed his dumbstruck brother through the heart with his barbed tail, piercing the weak spot he had raked earlier with his talons.

'I think it's closure,' Fulgrim answered with quiet resignation. 'Or sometimes torture.'

And so Ferrus Manus, the Gorgon and Primarch of the Iron Hands, died.

Again.

Fulgrim glared at the corpse, unable to hide his disgust.

'He was imperfect. How many times now is it that you have failed me, Fabius?'

The silhouette watching from the shadows shifted uncomfortably.

‘My lord,’ began a rasping, obsequious voice.

‘Don’t answer, I can see for myself.’

Lumen globes fixed in alcoves and the domed ceiling above flared into life in perfect unison. Revealed starkly in their glow were bodies. Huge, armoured, primarch bodies. Corpses. The coppery stench of their spilled and cooling blood was almost overwhelming. Fulgrim had ordered nullifying agents pumped into the chamber to mask the smell, but seeing it seemed to bring it back.

Ferrus Manus lay dead. His imperfect clones littered the chamber floor in their dozens, a silent and broken audience. Fulgrim regarded them disappointedly.

Apothecary Fabius’s hololithic image flickered nearby, but cast no light that he might observe without disturbing his primarch. Even with practised indifference disguising much of the emotion of his wizened face, Fabius looked relieved that he was not actually in Fulgrim’s presence.

The flesh-maker was in his usual garb. A shawl of rough, leathern skin draped purple and gold armour and a necrotic-looking armature sprouted from his back. The chirurgeon’s limbs were folded, though the many surgical instruments, diffusers and injection-philtres were still visible.

‘It is not easy, my lord,’ he tried again, peering through tangles of dirty white hair, taking advantage of the primarch’s distraction. ‘And corrupt samples yield imperfect results.’ He paused to lick those dry, cadaverous lips. ‘As you can see, cloning a being like a primarch – well, it is a process that borders on requiring the Emperor’s own scientific genius to perfect.’

A marble table, with a Regicide board carefully arranged upon it, stood alone and unmolested some metres away. The last one. Fulgrim eased his immense serpent body down next to it, taking his position as he had many times before.

Repetition was important, Fabius had informed him. It was the only way to control the many variables. Subtle changes would garner more conclusive results.

‘I can hear your pride from several systems away, Fabius.’

Fabius bowed. ‘It is complex, but not impossible.’

‘Then what about his hands?’ Fulgrim snapped. ‘They were like flowing mercury, not gauntleted. He must be perfect! I need this Fabius. I need it. When Ferrus died I was a prisoner in my own flesh. I have to speak to him. I have to tell him...’ he trailed off.

‘Replication is not easy,’ said the Apothecary, filling the brief silence with his squirming excuses. ‘As I said, a corrupt sample–’

‘The blood from my blade shall have to suffice!’

‘Yes, my lord, but the problem I am trying to–’

‘Shut up. I’m bored.’ Fulgrim sneered at the hololith. ‘You are an unpleasant creature, Fabius. So full of bile.’

‘As you wish, my lord. Are you ready to try again?’

Fulgrim nodded curtly and the lights dimmed once more, a single globe staying lit over the Regicide table as the rest of the chamber was drowned in darkness. From below there came the sound of gears and servos, a great mechanism at work. A hatch slid open, large enough to admit a hulking figure in black war-plate sitting upon a simple stool.

As the clone reached the chamber, the platform filled the hatchway and Ferrus opened his eyes.

‘Brother,’ it said warmly, awareness lighting up its face. ‘Are you ready to play?’

I am ready... hissed the voice in Fulgrim’s head.

Have I not silenced you?

You can no more silence me than you can silence yourself, dear host.

You are subservient to me.

For now...

Fulgrim clenched a fist, but the daemon would have to wait. He wasn't surprised that it had resurfaced. This had as much to do with it as it did Fulgrim and his brother.

Ferrus seemed not to notice the delay, his awareness held in mental stasis until Fulgrim gestured to the board. The Phoenician smiled as Ferrus looked down to consider his move.

'Do you consider yourself the Tetrarch or the Emperor?' asked Fulgrim, and the game began.

Again.

Unlike most of his brethren, Fabius preferred isolation to the company of others. He had always regarded his pathology as unique amongst the Emperor's Children – whenever he flayed a subject or pinned back its flesh to reveal the complex anatomy of its internal organs, there was an end in mind. Knowledge, reason. It separated him from his more... self-indulgent siblings.

Fabius desired sensation. He wanted to experience all of it, but he wanted to do that forever. He also knew that his great work would take time. Millennia, perhaps, despite the fact he had already made significant progress.

By returning to the *Pride of the Emperor*, he had to sacrifice certain 'freedoms' to experiment, proscriptions he had not been bound by on the *Andronius*, but it was a large ship and Fulgrim had much to occupy him already. If this latest fascination with the Gorgon was anything to gauge by, Fabius could operate more or less with impunity.

If he was careful.

In the antechamber where he currently toiled, secrecy was of prime importance. A gene-coded key was required to access it, something Fabius altered every few cycles. It was also hidden deep in the bowels of the ship and would not appear on any schematics or auspex scans. It was, for all intents and purposes, a dead zone.

The irony of that particular nomenclature amused the Apothecary. He smiled, seeing himself reflected grimly in the outer glass on the caskets he had under observation.

In one, a mutated freak with tiny winged appendages of gristle and wasted flesh. It mewled in the briny solution of the casket, blind and forever drowning. Another bore its organs on the outside, a ruddy scum collecting at the bottom of its casket as it raged impotently with its shrivelled fists against the glass. The samples numbered in the dozens, each in varying stages of evolution and genetic success.

Ferrus had not been the first, though he was advanced. Nor would he be the last.

Strolling the length of the laboratorium, the caskets reminded Fabius of some insidious processional. He paused at the last in the line.

Within was an infant child, curled up, sleeping warm and safe within its amniotic stew. A Cthonian birthmark was visible on the small of the child's tiny back.

'Sleep,' hissed Fabius, a grim nursemaid to the slumbering infant, 'for when you wake, the galaxy shall be a very different place.'

Fulgrim's monstrous form is revealed

CHIRURGEON

Nick Kyme

The air is cold and reeks of counterseptic. Very little light penetrates the dingy apothecarion, because I have set the lumens low to keep my subjects quiescent as I conduct my research. The gloom focuses what light I allow to permeate, and hones it surgically like a scalpel.

I have many blades, many drills and shears, hooks, saws and syringes. Each instrument is a vital tool in my surgeon's arsenal. Every limb of the armature I carry is as essential as my actual physical appendages. Not only do my tools cut flesh, they explore truth. Secrets reside in the flesh, secrets I mean to excise and then study. Only here in this apothecarion can I become who I truly am.

Within these cloistered rooms, I am detached from emotion and do not see the corpses that end up on my slab as anything except bodies. Allies, adversaries, they are the same when rendered down to their constituent parts by blades and chemicals. I become the armature. Its cuts are my cuts; its vials and philtres are a constituent part of my own physiology. As I conduct my work, I am not the transhuman being my brothers have come to know me as, I am apart – I am the chirurgeon.

Several of my patients reach me as corpses. Broken bodies, even dead and inert ones, can yield knowledge though. Others carry injuries from which there is no recovery, or at least, if it suits my purpose, I ensure they make no recovery. Fewer still I can actually save, and this flesh matter interests me the least.

Apothecary is my vocation, but it is not my passion.

My interest lies in what comprises the essence of a subject, for within the genetic code of each is the means to unlock godhood or some power akin to it: creation and amalgamation, expressed in patchwork renditions of man, reaching for the apogee of scientific achievement, the quest for the universal panacea of life. Nothing less than perfection. I do not think of it as hubris, nor do I consider that I overreach. I know who I am and what I do.

I am Fabius, and I am a herald of evolution.

My most recent subject lies upon the medi-slab, alive but numbed from the neck down. The surgery I have planned is both invasive and extreme. I confess to a tremor of excitement at the prospect of it. A contagion riddles this bodily form lying beneath my chirurgeon's blades, and I mean to find it and cut it out.

'Begin audio log: A461/03:16.'

My voice is a dry-throated rasp as the analogue recorder begins to spool with dull half-clicks, and makes me realise how long it has been since I have spoken to another living soul.

That would be my father, when he was snared by his own game, enslaved… by what? Guilt? Perhaps.

I have left him with his brother, or the thing that looks very much like him, albeit with head now attached. It is diverting, but not fulfilling, and it does not answer the question which the body on my slab poses.

Is there a cure?

As yet, I have no answer and this vexes me. Left alone by Fulgrim, I can at least continue my research in

relative peace.

The laboratorium is a separate annex from the apothecarion, one known only to me. It is a refuge for my mind as much as it is for my instruments and samples. Most precious are the amniotic caskets and the imperfect spawn within. I keep every failed experiment, knowing that I shall learn from the previous iteration and adapt. Every scrap of flesh has its uses. Nothing is ever wasted in striving for the perfect expression of mankind.

I lose time in this place, buried in research, obsessively experimenting. I know I have been down here for hours, possibly days already, but my preparation is exacting and comprehensive. I cannot stint, for this particular work is too important.

I begin cataloguing, as I always do.

Height, mass and any remarkable visual data are recorded. This is largely perfunctory and not crucial to my examination. It begins in earnest as I cut.

'I am beginning with a Y-shaped incision first medial to lateral and then along the midsagittal plane, anterior, proximal to jugular and lower abdomen.'

The chirurgeon reacts instantly. As the other metal limbs loiter with arachnid poise above the subject's gelid flesh, a single barbed appendage descends to make the first cut. It goes deep, all the way to the black carapace that resides beneath the epidermis and dermis, and buried within the subcutaneous tissue. The blade describes the Y-shaped incision as directed, drawing little blood. As the first arm reacts, two more descend, each terminating in a pair of forceps that gently peel back the skin and flesh to expose the interface.

A glossy black membrane is revealed, fitted with circular transfusion points and neural sensors.

Extraction is difficult but not impossible.

As a section of black carapace is removed, a pict-screen situated above the medi-slab relates further data concerning the blood-slick rib-plate beneath it.

'Visual examination of blood toxicity suggests a worsening of condition since previous examination. Access record V460/04:18.'

A brief interlude of static obscures the image as the recording cogitator searches for the requested file. A muted image capture is relayed that confirms my initial analysis.

I blink-click further instructions and my chirurgeon's limbs do the rest, inserting a cannula into the pale flesh of the subject's shoulder to extract a sample for more detailed examination later. As the recording of the current procedure resumes, I see that the fluid excised into the glass receptacle of the cannula is thin and distorted by minute, waxy deposits.

The hot, metallic reek of blood wars with the odour of counterseptic and I reduce the temperature further to maintain optimal environmental conditions.

'Addendum to cursory visual examination: ossified growths infect rib-plate, suggesting entire skeletal structure is at risk from bone deformation. Potential ossmodula corruption.'

The mutations are small but visible without the need of microscopic examination. I am reminded of hooks or tiny claws jutting from the ribs.

A bone saw burrs noisily. I catch sight of it descending in my peripheral vision, the light refracting from its rapidly turning blade. Monomolecular steel shaves transhuman bone mass easily, the slivers captured by a trough and deposited in a lozenge-shaped canister for later analysis.

'Initiating invasive exploration into bone strata with single sagittal cut across sternum.'

I employ clamps to hold the envelope of skin in place, before using a sternal saw to shear the central rib bone in half. It takes several minutes. Transhuman bone mass is tough and thick. I watch silently and patiently until it is done. A rancid, burning smell assails my nostrils. Wisps of powdered bone drift

through the shafts of stark light illuminating the medi-slab like dust motes.

'Secondary medial to lateral, anterior cuts to release bone plate from housing in order to expose organs and begin more detailed biological analysis.'

I document with my eyes, and my voice.

After breaking through the sternum, the saw continues and starts to cut two perfectly identical squares of bone from the subject's rib-plate. Unlike human autopsy or invasive surgery, a rib-spreader is of little to no use in the case of transhuman anatomy. The ossified carapace is too hard and unyielding. An aperture must be opened in the solid cage of bone that encases a legionary's vulnerable organs. The entire bone plate itself must be severed from the ribs that arc around to the spine and lifted off like a grisly hatch. I am all too familiar with this procedure and conduct it almost without conscious thought.

This takes time, and, as the whine of razor-edged teeth sundering bone fades to white noise, I decide to return to a much earlier analysis I conducted when first accepting the symbolic helix of my order.

'Halt recording. Access archive.'

I blink-click the appropriate file from a screed of data relayed on a second pict-screen.

A few seconds lapse as the cogitator finds and plays the requested audio log.

I recognise my voice, and sneer at the youth and ignorance of it.

'Personal log. Fabius, III Legion, Apothecarion Cadre.

'A terrible calamity has befallen us. We who, in our hubris, believed ourselves perfect have come undone by an imperfect system…'

The words spur my mind towards the past and are soon usurped by memory.

I cleansed the blade of my gladius on the scrap of cloak still hanging from my shoulder guards.

Another battle, another compliance. A society lies smashed beneath the booted heel of the Crusade. For Terra, for the Emperor and the promulgation of the Imperial Truth.

The bloodshed, the killing, faded slowly. Stalking through dust-choked ruins, ears ringing with the percussive bellow of bolters… Some of my kinsmen wanted nothing more than to relive this day over and over. I longed for something more.

'*A war well won, Fabius,*' *uttered a familiar voice behind me.*

I was standing on a ridge where a city once was, the shattered remains of a great statue of its potentate under my booted feet and serving as little more than a vantage point now.

From it, I saw tanks and the numerous geno-cohorts of the Imperial Army. I saw discipline masters shouting orders, but their words were swallowed up by the death throes of a city breaking apart.

'*Aye, Lycaeon. Perhaps.*'

As I cast my eye over the aftermath, I saw smoke enough to blot out the midday suns and fire sufficient to burn a world. In essence, that was precisely what we had done.

'*So melancholic, brother,*' *said Lycaeon, jovial as he rapped my arm with a gauntleted fist.*

He saved my life today. Again. Few wielded a sword as well as my vassal brother.

I sheathed my gladius, as Lycaeon raised his, trying to catch a ray of sun against its gilded blade.

He managed it through a brief break in the smoke cloud, and basked, as he always did, in glory.

'*You would think a warrior's mood would lighten at the apex of victory.*'

He turned to face me, slipping sword back into scabbard, and I met his gaze.

Lycaeon was a seventh generation Loculus, descended from the old houses of Terra before they were forced into supplication. Like me, his eyes were violet and his hair was a golden yellow like the sun he had strived so hard to capture upon the plasteel of his sword.

As warriors of the III Legion, known by some as His heralds, we wore power armour emblazoned with

the thunderbolt and rayed sun.

Unlike me, Lycaeon had a yearning for command and displayed all the traits of the militaristic aristocracy to which he traced his lineage.

'My demeanour would improve if our numbers could be swelled. Ever since Proxima–'

Lycaeon hissed, turning aside so I saw him only in profile.

'Be still, Fabius. Exult in triumph, as I do.' He gestured out beyond the ruins to the battlefield below us, where the geno-cohorts still cheered. 'As they do.'

Lesser mortals, military levies and Terran hosts of 'men' bayed and hollered in the artificial basin we had made with our preliminary bombardment. I did not have the heart to tell Lycaeon the reason there were so many was because our ranks had thinned egregiously since the Selenite plot. The cultists hated the Emperor and his warriors. They saw tyranny, not unity, in the assimilation of the techno-barbarian tribes of Old Earth.

'Remember Proxima,' said Lycaeon, puffing up his chest with pride at the memory of fighting alongside the Emperor. 'Such glories… We shall see their like again, brother.'

'I do not see the glory in this, Lycaeon. I see only further attrition.'

Lycaeon scowled. 'You see Selenites at every turn. There are vaults on Terra that would see us renewed. By the Throne of Earth, we are proof of it.'

It was true. Several of the Legion were here only by dint of those reserves. Rapid implantation and deployment. It had felt hurried and desperate, though.

Lycaeon could clearly see I remained unconvinced. 'Speak to Legion Master Thrallas,' he said. 'Have him reassure you as he has me. More will come. Our ranks will be restored.'

He saluted, his right fist striking the left pectoral of his armour.

'I hope you are right,' I said, returning his salute, before descending into the ruins to scavenge from the dead.

The teeth of the bone saw, shrieking hungrily, return me to my senses. As the whirring blade retreats, I am afforded a view of what lies beneath the subject's rib-plate. Hearts, lungs, kidney, liver, intestine, stomach, all is relayed on the pict-screen. A mild arrhythmia in the primary heart is disconcerting, as is the faint distemper manifest in the lungs. As I commit my observations eidetically, the audio continues. By now, I cannot distinguish recording from the voices of memory and the two begin to blend together.

'...perversely, our glory is diminished by the war and the Legion's stark inability to weather attrition. In only a single solar year after Proxima, we have become an endangered species.

All efforts, including my own, to arrest the rapid entropy of the Legion have thus far been futile. My only meaningful deed is to continue compiling the lexicon of the infected. It is small consolation, and I confess that I now fear for the vaunted sons of Europa.'

I ended the recording at the same time as I saw a figure standing in silhouette at the entrance to my apothecarion.

It was a grand name for it. 'Field tent' would be more appropriate, but it was sufficient for my needs and, most importantly, allowed me to collect genetic material directly from the battlefield. I was a carrion crow, extracting what I needed from the dead. Precious gene-seed. For now, it was our only means of reinforcement.

'Enter then, if you're going to,' I said, by way of invitation.

Lycaeon stepped into the glow of a sodium lamp hanging overhead. I was not surprised. It had been several months since we last saw one another, since my new posting.

He tapped the sodium lamp with the tip of his finger.

'You need more sun, brother,' he said, smiling in that way of his that suggested he was politely mocking you. 'Sallow-faced, gaunt…. Doesn't suit you, Fabius.'

'It entirely suits me, as I know you agree. Though, perhaps you should be the Apothecary,' I muttered, returning to my research.

'Brother…' he said.

My eyes remained on my work.

'Fabius!'

I looked up then, and saw the hurt in his eyes.

He had one hand on the pommel of his gladius, whilst he held his helmet in the crook of the opposite arm. My old comrade frowned. It would be the last time I ever felt regret.

Falling to silence for a moment, Lycaeon wandered around in the shadows as if trying to find something to fix his attention upon.

After a short while, I put down my files.

'You need something?'

'A little courtesy from an old friend.' He gave the slight without looking at me.

I bowed my head, apologised and walked around my desk to embrace him.

'I am a slave to my work, Lycaeon. I scarcely recognise my brothers anymore. They are names which I catalogue, bio-matter than must be processed. I confess, it has dehumanised me.'

Lycaeon clapped me on the shoulder, his smile warm but his eyes holding an unspoken question. He saw the corpses still regaled in their armour at the back of the tent and went over to them.

'Were you able to extract their gene-seed?'

Even Lycaeon, the blind optimist, now showed concern about our plight.

'Not intact,' I answered, and joined him by the supine bodies. 'Except for one.'

His mood lightened, I saw it in the glance he afforded me out of the corner of his eye, until I slowly shook my head.

'The blight?'

'The blight.'

This is why he had come. Lycaeon cared for our friendship, but he cared more for his continued existence.

Standing next to him, I saw how battered his armour was. I already knew how wearing the ongoing campaign had been for our Legion. Fewer and fewer warriors of the III were taking to the field in each subsequent engagement. As a result, the impact of every casualty sustained was magnified.

'No one knows where it came from, nor how many of us are affected. Thus far, the majority of afflicted gene-seed comes from the immature reserve that had been held on Terra, but there have been other instances.'

Both he and I could have come from those reserve stocks, the tainted gene-seed. Records had been mysteriously lost.

Lycaeon's voice came out little louder than a whisper.

'What are its effects, Fabius?'

'Degenerative. Some strain of the viral contagion has found its way into III Legion gene-stocks. There is no telling how pervasive it is.'

He gestured to the files on my desk.

'A record of the infected?'

'Yes. I am close to finding a way to test for it.'

His mood brightened again. 'A cure?'

For the second time, I shook my head, and for the second time I felt the pain of disappointing my brother.

'Not yet.'

'But there is hope?'

'Barring the miraculous, our Legion's demise not only seems inexorable, it is also inevitable. Any other conclusion is unlikely, any hope remote at this point.'

The remembered words of my former self are hardly more encouraging than the sight of the deteriorated organs I now catalogue.

'Several lesions and tumors are present throughout all major organs. Primary heart, secondary heart, multi-lung, oolitic kidney are all affected to varying degrees. Extracting samples for biopsy from each…'

A curette abrades a small matter sample from each organ, harvesting enough for later analysis, and, triggered by the continuing audio, I descend back into memory.

'In an attempt to purge the Legion of the blight, as it has come to be known, all infected gene-seed is to be destroyed with immediate effect. This purging edict extends to all sworn brothers of the Legion who show any evidence of base level genetic malformation or taint.'

There were three subjects before me, all living, all denuded of their armour.

They were also shackled and guarded by armour-clad legionaries lurking at the tent mouth.

I already knew their fate, but had decided on the courtesy of telling them to their faces.

'Gaius, Etiad, Vortexese,' I said, my voice distorted by the rebreather. 'You are impure. You have the blight.'

Etiad tried to rise, but swift gauntleted hands held him down. I closed my eyes as they were taken, my ears deaf to Etiad's tirade.

'I will need their bodies after you are finished with them,' I said to the guards, inscribing each of the blighted's names into the lexicon.

None answered me as they marched the condemned outside, but I knew I had been heard.

My instructions had been exact. No bolters, only blades. A mass-reactive pulps organs and shreds tissue. I needed their flesh intact if I was to fabricate a cure. A heart thrust, destroying the primary organ would suffice. Death was near-silent for these warriors, but on their knees like traitors.

The thought was an unpleasant one.

As keeper of the lexicon, I had effectively become an executioner. By scientific method, I determined whether or not a taint was present. I might not have wielded the gladius that had killed Gaius, Etiad and Vortexese, but I had effectively sanctioned their executions all the same.

I believed further study was necessary to understand the nature of the taint. As such, I sequestered several euthanised battle-brothers for testing and experimentation. I reasoned that if I could somehow unlock the gene-taint that brought about the blight, I might yet be able to reverse its effects. Of course, with the gene-stocks currently undergoing total purgation, any discovery at this point might be moot, but I was content to settle for a correct diagnosis and effective theoretical treatment.

The booted footfalls of the returning guards announce another intake of flesh-matter.

I did not look up as they brought the first of the bodies.

'Leave it there,' I said, gesturing to the empty slabs.

I only raised my eyes after the warriors had left. One hawked and spat as he did so. I ignored it.

I looked into the eyes of Etiad instead, but could find no compassion or guilt as his dead man's glare. Instead, I set down my auto-quill and went to a bank of instruments secured in a rack by the bodies.

Cutters, saws, drills, I had an extensive array of tools at my disposal but it was a device of my own

design that caught my eye.

An armature, it had four mechanical, multi-jointed limbs that extended from its power battery. I wore it like a carapace shell upon my back, the arms extended over my shoulders and slaved to auto-mnemonic responses much like my armour.

It was heavy, but tolerable against my transhuman frame. The burden was worth the effort, for my efficacy as a surgeon increased exponentially with its usage.

'Let us see then,' I uttered to the corpse of Etiad, the limbs clicking and chirruping as if sentient, 'what lies under your flesh.'

I flit between past and present as the audio dredges memory but allows resurface between the conclusion of each session and the segue into the next.

For now, I am back aboard the ship's apothecarion, a partially exposed system of organs awaiting my attention.

Delving deeper into the subject's body, I extract sample material from the biscopea, haemastamen, larraman's organ and preomnor. Minor growths and abnormalities are present in each. A tremor of consternation wrinkles my sweating brow. I had hoped for better results.

In the present circumstances, I cannot analyse omophagea, occulobe, lyman's ear, sus-an membrane, catalepsean node, neuroglottis or betcher's gland.

I *am* able to review the potential nexus of this taint, however, the fully matured progenoid embedded within the subject's chest cavity.

It too bears signs of mutation, a slow degrading of tissue and form, one I am sadly all too familiar with. The audio log almost rolls over me now as I try to appreciate the magnitude of what is before me on the medi-slab.

This is not a fallen warrior that I minister to, it is a diseased one, a remnant that should have died centuries ago but endured through science and ingenuity. It is, by far, my most important subject.

'*Tissue samples from a random cross section of legionaries have revealed an end to the taint, though our numbers are so few as to be regarded as almost extinct. In order for genetic cataloging to be considered comprehensive, I have added my own samples to the data. Initial analysis is not reassuring. Further study is needed. If I am to maintain my research, I must obfuscate my personal results to avoid purgation.'*

I remember well what I did, the bonds of brotherhood I broke on account of my desire and cold, analytical mind.

Lycaeon sat before me. He was stripped of his armour, his glare murderous. I was trying to ignore the bond I was about to break, my hand upon the lexicon where his name was already written.

'What is your verdict then, brother?' he asked, and I saw our friendship die in his eyes.

Soon it wouldn't matter. In any case, friendship had become an outmoded concept when levied against the value of my research.

The chirurgeon clicked and whirred behind me. I seldom removed it anymore and increasingly sought ways in which I could bond more inextricably with the device.

'Lycaeon,' I said, 'you are impure. You have–'

Lycaeon stood, giving me the old Legion salute. I did not return the gesture, recognising the scorn in it, but no longer the meaning or purpose. He then about-faced to his executioners without another word.

I watched him leave, a slight nerve tremor below my right eye, before returning to my research.

As an afterthought, I called to the departing guards.

'I will need his body. Return it once you are done.'

The chirurgeon excises the last tissue samples for biopsy and my analysis is complete. Without needing to see the results, I estimate the prognosis to be bleak. Degeneration of biological matter in every organ. Projected life expectancy less than a solar year.

The arachnid limbs hover, awaiting further instruction.

I give it bitterly.

'Stitch me up.'

Via a series of cables, I have linked the armature to my neural implants. It affords me total control, whilst remaining inured to the pain of the operation through strong anaesthetic.

That said, the surgery has been long and I can feel the smallest pinpricks of sensation flaring across my body.

Fortunately, the armature works quickly. I smell fusing bone and then the bio-adhesive used to reassemble my black carapace. Both will heal in time, or they would if I had any time left or if my regenerative capabilities were not compromised.

It takes several hours, and by the time it is done, I am clenching my teeth and near-screaming in agony.

'All for naught,' I rasp, rising to a sitting position.

As I swing my legs over the edge of the medi-slab, I hear the last few seconds of the audio log play to a conclusion.

'The Crusade has brought us to Chemos and a reunion with our genetic forebear, Fulgrim. Within our primarch resides the means for renewed synthesis of III Legion gene-seed. On Chemos, there are hardy subjects worthy of implantation. Salvation now seems likely, but my own plight, whilst successfully hidden and at the stage of minor degeneration is, based on all empirical evidence, unlikely to be averted. I continue to–'

I shut it down, tiring of it and the memories the sound of my younger self unearthed.

Slipping down off the medi-slab, I feel the pain of my self-inflicted surgeries anew and grimace as I pad along the cold apothecarion floor to the mirror.

I use it for full length visual examination. The surface is a dull slab until activated, like a blank slate of grey wall. As I blink-click, it reflects my naked form back at me.

Heavy stitching crosshatches my skin, which is thin and sallow. My face looks worst, skeletal and drawn like the corpses I dissect. My eyes have become pinched, surrounded by chasms of dark skin. Weary, I lean hard against the mirror's frame and run a trembling hand through my hair. A clump comes back, threaded around my fingers.

An elixir stands ready. It will restore a measure of my vitality, and keep my condition hidden from others.

'Lycaeon,' I utter to the darkness, 'your sacrifice shall not be for nothing.'

No answer returns, save for the echo of my own enfeebled voice.

I have to find another way, I determine. I consider the plight of my father and the thing that shares his body.

Where science has failed, I must turn to the arcane for answers.

I reach for the elixir, a distilled concoction of restorative enzymes and proteins rendered from transhuman donors. Their deaths serve a purpose. My need is greater, my work more important.

As I inject the draught into my bloodstream, I revel in its sudden potency. Every nerve ending screams

with dagger-edged pain, synapses ignite like solar flares in my brain. I stagger, the effects almost overwhelming. It soon subsides, leaving me vital, renewed. Cognition, physical strength, endurance, stamina and haptic acuity are all enhanced. It is a falsehood, though. A balm for an untreatable illness that will outstrip the measures of retardation I have employed.

Knowing the elixir will not last and soon not work at all, I decide that I must speak to the daemon. That will also mean confessing to my father. I will not do so like this, however.

'My armour,' I utter to the shadows.

A shuffling form responds, slow, yet still animate and dutiful.

A purple greave is proffered that matches the colour of the automaton's eyes. My retainer is another secret from the Legion. His armour is older by comparison, the thunder bolt iconography worn and faded. A blade slit around the heart still lingers in the battleplate, a wound that cannot heal. The stitching around his neck and face is the mirror of my own. So too is his physiognomy.

His salutes, right fist striking left pectoral. It is awkward, but still dutiful.

I do not reciprocate.

'Thank you, Lycaeon,' I say to my vassal brother, feeling better already.

TWISTED

Guy Haley

The *Vengeful Spirit* had changed. Horus had changed. But the tedious intricacies of running a warfleet had not. Warfare was warfare, whether conducted at the behest of the Council of Terra or the urging of howling gods. It always came down to the numbers.

The fifty-eighth petitioner to the Warmaster that day was a short logistician, principally composed of fat and fear. He blinked and mumbled his way through his request, eyes sliding every second – if not more often – to the pair of Justaerin Terminators flanking the basalt throne at the heart of Lupercal's Court.

No one sat upon the throne. It was the throne of the primarch, and none but he might occupy it.

Horus was absent. The Warmaster had no time for petty concerns.

Maloghurst, the equerry of the Warmaster, sat in judgment in his stead on a stool by the throne's dais. Were it not for his own great personal presence, he might have looked ridiculous. The throne was sized for a demigod, the dais tall, the court that surrounded it dizzyingly high and ornate. Battle honours stirred in ventilation draughts. Stars glared mercilessly from the void through armourglass ports. Blue shadows jealously guarded the statues and weapons set into the walls.

Horus was not there, but his presence steeped the court.

Maloghurst was insignificant in comparison – worse, he was far from the most perfect of Horus's sons. His back was perpetually slanted, a cane forever close to hand – he was a fallen angel whose imperfections were made all the more glaring in his master's shadow.

His back was broken, but his intellect was not. Twisted in mind as well as body. Maloghurst's name had become a byword for fear.

The fat man's lips stumbled to a stop.

'In three days' time, we are due to engage in the assault on Lamrys,' said Maloghurst, 'and you choose *now* to bring this trivial matter to my attention?' His voice growled threateningly from behind his respirator. He wore his armour and his mouthpiece constantly, more or less. His battleplate had become a crutch.

Still, the logistician blanched.

'I am sorry, my lord, but the correct scheduling of fuel distribution prior to the attack is of great importance. It must be performed before we approach the mid-system line. I cannot fulfil my role if–'

Maloghurst cut him off by rapping his cane hard against the marble floor. The crack echoed and multiplied from the walls.

'All of us are burdened. Do you choose to consider your burden to be greater than that of the Warmaster?'

'No, my lord!'

'This is Lupercal's Court.' Maloghurst pointed to a wide arch. 'Through there the Warmaster has his staterooms. I am the Warmaster's equerry. Here you are but one step from the ear of our Lord Horus himself. You should be mindful of what you choose to speak into it.'

‘My lord, forgive me. I will make greater efforts. I require only a little aid.’ The fat man gulped. His attention had latched itself fully upon the Justaerin.

Maloghurst grasped the skull atop his cane. ‘Do not look to them. I could kill you myself without difficulty.’

He pushed his weight down upon the slender stick of ebony and heaved himself to his feet, and limped from his seat to the logistician. The fat man threw himself down on his hands and knees, but Maloghurst bent low. Grabbing a loose handful of hair and augmetic interface tendrils, he hauled the adept into the air, transhuman muscles bearing the weight easily, although his bones protested at the load. The logistician gaped, his mouth opening and closing moistly as he desperately tried not to scream. Tears welled from screwed-tight eyes to bead his cheeks.

Maloghurst stared him full in the face. ‘What would the Warmaster do, should he find himself in such a situation?’

The man smelled sour. Rank sweat and desperation mingled unwholesomely. Maloghurst suspected he would not answer for fear that the wrong response would end his life. He was correct in that assumption.

But the logistician was more clever than he seemed.

‘The Warmaster, in any situation, would find a way of achieving his desired result,’ he gasped.

Maloghurst admired the man’s calmness in the face of death. That, more than his answer, saved his life.

‘Yes! Whether that be toppling the lying Emperor or delivering the right amount of supplies to four insignificant cruiser squadrons!’ He released the man. ‘Get out. Do your duty without complaint. If I see you here again, I will tear your heart from your chest.’

Maloghurst turned and went back to the stool by the throne. Sparks of pain tickled his fused spine and pelvis. He gritted his teeth as he retook his seat.

Pain had been one of two constants in Maloghurst’s life for some time. The other was responsibility.

An unwelcome third had recently made itself known to him.

Vulnerability.

He was vulnerable, more so with each passing day. He had always been respected, but he had never been well liked. There was a feral mood upon the Legion of late. Old practices long suppressed now resurfaced – the savage face of Cthonia revealed as the facade of calm imposed by the Emperor was abraded by war. Rivalries had become more pronounced, more violent.

His closeness to Horus provoked jealousy. In a society of warriors, his attention to more cerebral matters marked him out for derision.

And so the distance between himself and his brothers yawned wider on the one hand. No great matter, were it not that on the other the gulf between Horus and himself also grew. No human or transhuman could ever hope to knowingly inveigle themselves with a primarch, but for two hundred years their friendship had at least bridged the fundamental gap between them.

Recently, Horus had grown far beyond mortal concerns. Ever since Molech.

None would challenge Horus’s authority, but they would dare to challenge Maloghurst for the primarch’s favour and the chance to influence the Warmaster. There was a sense of exposure growing in him that he had never felt before. Maloghurst had become a target.

But danger would not keep him from his duty.

‘Next,’ he said, with a heavy breath.

There were no announcements. No pomp. Another mortal was sent in from the antechamber where the petitioners waited without ceremony.

Rakshel, envoy for the Davinites, had taken up residence aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*. He padded softly along the aisle leading to the throne, bowing deeply ten metres from Maloghurst.

The equerry's expression stiffened. The Davinites' star was long fallen.

Before the half-man could begin his usual long, obsequious litany of praise, Maloghurst spoke.

'I will save us some time. If your request is the same as the last four occasions you have come before me, Rakshel, then the answer is still no.'

Rakshel affected a look of understanding. On his furred, broad face it was comical. Once, Maloghurst had felt disdain for the Davinites' degenerate forms. But since Horus declared his independence, he had seen far grosser deviations, and had learned that behind the ugly mask was often hidden power.

Now, he despised the Davinites mainly for their weakness. They were craven, scheming, always whispering to those stronger than themselves, and on the lookout for some advantage. In Erebus they had found a kindred soul.

'That is to be expected,' Rakshel slurred. 'I am bound to tell you once again of the priesthood's sense of sorrowful rejection.'

'Your people tutored the wretch Erebus,' said Maloghurst coolly. 'You are lucky to be alive.'

'We healed the Warmaster. We guided him to the truth that the false Emperor hid from all of you. Do not dismiss us. You will appreciate the import I attach to this issue, that I come here almost certain to be greeted with rejection. There are powers we are aware of – powers we taught to Erebus. We can share them with the Warmaster. We have great influence with the lords of creation.'

Maloghurst replied tersely. 'Powers? Influence?' He scoffed. 'The Warmaster is far beyond your petty sorceries.'

'Powers, yes. Influence, yes. Some powers are malignant. Some influences can be bent to ill ends. The warp dances in agitation. Great forces are moving.'

'None is greater than mighty Lupercal.'

'No matter how mighty one is, there is always someone mightier,' countered Rakshel. 'Let us help guard our master against these powers. Allow us our audience with Horus. Neither you nor he will regret it.'

Maloghurst leaned forward, lacing the fingers of both hands over the head of his cane. 'Is that a threat, Rakshel? So many groups outside the Legion jockey for the primarch's attention. Do not become an irritant to the Warmaster. Do not become a problem for me. Go away.'

Rakshel obeyed without demur. He bowed. 'You do your duty, I do mine. I am sorry that we remain at an impasse.'

'Leave.'

The Davinite bowed again and departed.

'Seal the doors,' said Maloghurst to the Justaerin. 'That is enough for today. Tell the rest to consider their petitions carefully before they come back tomorrow. Perhaps a few executions will encourage them to keep their pathetic problems to themselves.'

'Yes, my lord,' growled the Justaerin. The warrior did nothing to hide his disdain. Maloghurst was powerful, but not in a way that Falkus Kibre's men appreciated.

The equerry was no longer a fighter, and the newest recruits of the Legion did not even remember the days when he had been. The Sons of Horus had little respect for politics. They had only a little more for commanders who could not take to the field.

Maloghurst headed for the doors that led to the command deck, avoiding the petitioners in the antechamber. Away from his stool, no light but that of the stars illuminated him. Scraped clean of Erebus's influence, the court appeared a more wholesome place, more fitting to a leader of Horus's stature.

The impression was a misleading one. The shadows of the *Vengeful Spirit* harboured hidden things. The animus of the place was anything but clean. The whispers were at their worst in the quiet spaces. Ever since Davin they had been there, hiding, out of the way. Now they plagued the whole ship. Recently,

Maloghurst had heard them even in Horus's sanctum. Despite his growing mastery of the primal mysteries, Maloghurst hurried through the court, impatiently awaiting the opening of doors to the hubbub of the bridge.

Maloghurst… Twisted…

He could not stop himself from looking over his shoulder. There was nothing he could see, of course, but he sensed something. He was quite sure of that. An emotion took his hearts.

Not fear – never that – but unease, certainly.

He muttered a cantrip he had torn from a dying sorcerer. The sense of presence diminished slightly in response.

Light and noise dispelled the whispering entirely. Maloghurst stepped through, and walked gladly among the command crew. The tapping of his skull-topped cane heralded his presence. Officers, thralls and legionaries alike stood to attention as he passed their stations.

He welcomed the vox-chatter, the orders, the endless rounds of reports, the mindless drone of servitors. Human bodies warmed the air. It smelled of people, of sweat and soap and the dusty heat vented by machines. The machine-mind of the *Vengeful Spirit* belonged still to the mundane realm, even if its soul did not.

Maloghurst…

He gritted his teeth behind his breathing mask. The voice had come to him six weeks ago. Always just behind his left shoulder. He fixed his face into an imperious glare. Let none know of his disquiet. A display of weakness could doom him.

Nevertheless, he walked more quickly.

The next day, Maloghurst took the Avenue of Glory and Lament from his quarters in the command spires. His bodyguard thumped after him, towering over the serfs that swarmed the way. Corridor-trains whirred past, taking personnel from one end of the massive vessel to the other. The avenue exhibited little sign of the changes brought on by the war. All was bustle and hurried efficiency, as it always had been.

The distance between the spires and the door he sought was short, but already the walk troubled him, his mis-set bones grinding against one another. He locked his pain in a grimace hidden behind his respirator, keeping it from his eyes.

Most people got quickly out of his way, whether they were Space Marines or thralls. His disability meant that he passed slowly along the great avenue of the ship, but he did so unimpeded.

Irritation gnawed at him. Dealing with the day to day management of the fleet was tedious. He longed for the next battle. More and more Horus favoured directing the war from the front line, leaving Maloghurst in command of the flagship. But the battles were always disappointingly brief. A week, maybe two, and another world burned.

No. He was honoured, he chided himself. Who else could the Warmaster trust? Imperial sympathisers were still to be found within the ranks of the old 63rd Expedition. There were none so astute as he. Anyone else given his role would fail to spot those who were less than loyal. He appraised those who passed him. Few were bold enough to look him in the eye – most hurried by, intent on their own business. A handful were less afraid. Ranking officers and his legionary brothers saluted him with varying enthusiasm.

Brothers. How little that word meant to him now. Save for Horus, he was alone.

Better that way, perhaps. A lone predator, aware of its surroundings, makes fewer errors.

He heard the whispers underneath the clamour of the avenue. Psychic overspill, the imprints of the dead and betrayed, and increasingly the honeyed words of the denizens of the warp. Their endless temptations

terrified the menials and the serfs. The fervour of many for their new creed was wavering. When a menial succumbed to the whispered promises and turned upon his comrades, it was invariably to the sound of wicked laughter.

They were always there. At the edge of hearing, accompanied often by a smell like warm blood and spoiled milk so strong that it coated the back of the throat.

He had a flash of himself raging.

Isn't it glorious?

He saw himself stripped to the waist, his hands covered in the blood of others.

Isn't it sublime?

He saw himself pull his bolt pistol and place it against the eye lens of the Justaerin flanking him.

Welcome me in, Twisted One. Be as Tormaggedon. Known true power. You made him. You see the power of the Luperci like none other. Take it for yourself.

Maloghurst pushed the unwelcome image away. He found himself staring a gunnery rating in the face. Over his high, armoured collar, his face was an unhealthy pallor. The whites of his eyes were a watery pink with black rings under them. The holy octed tattooed upon his cheek had become livid, raised like a scar.

Change was all about them, fuelled by the dark majesty of Horus.

Why should you not change too? asked the voice.

Not yet, thought Maloghurst. Not yet.

If he said that he had not considered taking the path of the Luperci himself, it would be a lie. So much power there, in that twining of souls. But the costs were too high for him to contemplate paying.

He was a puppeteer, not a puppet.

They descended a wide spiral stair languishing under a hellish heat and a crushing sense of claustrophobia. A hollow shaft at the centre stretched away to black infinity up and down, the steps wrapped round it as tightly as a coil of steely DNA. Mechanical sighs wheezed from the depths on hot winds, disembodied machine sounds pushed before them. The faint strains of songs of devotion were split by a scream.

And the voices… Every sound here carried a parasitic whisper.

Silence fell.

In the deep, faint and running footsteps pattered. They stopped. A door seal hissed. Then nothing. The whispers died. The sighing of the ship alone remained. Maloghurst was left with the sound of his breath wheezing into his respirator, his own unsteady steps, the whine of power armour grumbling at his unnatural gait, the steady clang of the Justaerin's feet following behind him.

They reached their destination. A metallic groan fled up the shaft as Maloghurst unlocked the door with his key wand.

A round room, the centre occupied by pipes as profuse as those of a devotional organ. Twenty individual cell-beds were set into the wall. A door to one side led off to crude facilities: a mess and latrine block.

Those who lived there were expecting them. They were gathered before the door, their pale grey uniforms grubby and torn. For some time the Sons of Horus had added fetishes to their armour, and Maloghurst saw them displayed by the thralls more and more in imitation. A medicine pouch, a crude octed scratched into a piece of scrap and worn as a medallion. Symbols painted in dark fluids on dirty cloth. Once the *Vengeful Spirit* had been a clean ship. They had lost some things in choosing the path that had always been inevitable.

Power always had a cost. Maloghurst was wise to that.

The thralls were couriers. They were among the very lowest, but their function was vital. In the tumult of battle, vox-systems failed. Data squirts might not carry, the cogitator units burned out by electromagnetic surges. A runner with a message was slower, but more reliable. A valuable back-up. A few carried data-sockets so that they might inload their messages to surgically isolated parts of their brains. They knew without knowing.

This issue Maloghurst had chosen to deal with himself. It would be useful edification for others. They were lowly, yes, but the men who carried the Warmaster's word must know that his eye was always upon them. Maloghurst must remind them how close they were to Lupercal. They would grovel when they remembered the honour it did them.

One of their number was in chains, on his knees and heavily bruised. His fellows and captors knelt beside him as the legionaries entered their cramped world. But there was a man at the fore of the group who did not kneel. His eyes were bright and hard in sockets purpled by lack of sleep.

He must be the ringleader, the accuser. Maloghurst wondered what calculation he had made to call directly upon the ship's lords. Attracting the attention of the Legion could have gone badly for him. It still might. The hard-eyed man dropped his eyes and pointed to his captive wordlessly.

'You defy the Warmaster,' Maloghurst said to the man in chains.

The captive would not look at him, but he did speak. 'Not defiance, a request. We do not have enough water. We are dying.' Upon the man's shoulders were rank stripes. A subordinary indentured officer. This must be his command.

Maloghurst knew the story. The fleet pushed on and on with little pause, Terra firmly in its sights. There was no time for resupply, no time for repair. Many parts of the ship were left without basic requirements. The couriers' leader intended to alleviate their suffering; perhaps he had been there, waiting outside Lupercal's Court yesterday when Maloghurst had declared the audiences at an end. His men, panicked, had thrown themselves upon the Legion's mercy. They would rather risk the slow death of thirst than anger their masters. Too bad for him.

Behind his respirator, Maloghurst smiled. True power was invested by fear. Here it was, as plain as the Emperor's lies. Had the man come to him, it might have been different. But the couriers had acted, and Maloghurst was in no mood for mercy.

Maloghurst pulled out his sacred dagger and swept it across the man's throat. Let it feed – it had not been blooded for some while. Bright blood spread a crimson fan across the decking.

'Your concern is heard. There is one less of you. The rest may drink more deeply.'

A sinuous laugh twisted on the air. Maloghurst turned swiftly to its source. A great shape stood at the farmost left of the couriers, a column composed of dark smoke and a palpable malevolence.

Maloghurst*,** it said. ***Become. Open the way.

The shape had no visible sensory organs, but it surely stared back at Maloghurst, for he could feel it scrying his very soul. A hand formed momentarily in the smoke. A long finger traced the jaw of a nearby courier. He shuddered, but the man's dread of the legionaries stopped him from looking up.

A hand touched his elbow. Maloghurst twitched.

'My lord?'

His gaze fell to the deck. The blood had gone, as though greedily absorbed by the ship itself.

The subordinary courier's men kept their eyes fixed upon the decking. Maloghurst searched the limits of the chamber, but the shadow was nowhere to be found.

'My *lord,'* said the Justaerin. Criticism of Maloghurst's lack of control was implicit in his tone.

'We are done here,' he muttered. His blade slid back into its sheath with a click, and he pointed to the hard-eyed man. 'You. You are now in charge of this group.'

'Aye, my lord,' the man whispered.

He left the couriers to dispose of their erstwhile commander. The urge to look over his shoulder as he left was almost impossible to defy, but defy it he did.

A Space Marine was not intended to dream in the manner of mortals. The dreams of normal men were a clumsy way of managing memories and learning. A legionary had no need to manage his memory, for his was as ordered as a well-kept library. His dreams therefore lacked the allegorical nature of mortal dreams, tending to the quotidian: the mastering of new skills, sped up by carefully designed hypnotic shaping.

But that night, Maloghurst dreamed as mortals dream.

He was in the abode of fire, and it burned him. The Warmaster stood in impossible company. A sorcerer in an azure parody of the Crimson King's garb stood to one side. Fulgrim was behind his brother, unchanged from his original form, while sundry other degenerates and warp-beasts clamoured all around. Erebus had returned to them, though his face was now a mask of grim spite. A holographic orb of Terra hung in the air in front of Horus.

Maloghurst was there, too. He saw himself from outside, as if he viewed the scene through another's eyes. How old and broken he looked, his ruined face hidden behind his ever-present respirator. The eyes gleamed with a touch of madness. This other Maloghurst wore a patchwork tabard of flayed human skin over his armour.

Everything was wrong. And the fire, burning hot, pressed around on all sides. Only he, the observing Maloghurst, appeared aware of it. His doppelganger – or was it the true Maloghurst, and he was some other? – appeared entirely ignorant of the heat.

The others continued their debate unconcerned. Horus laid out his plans for the conquest of Terra. His subordinates, aides and adjutants gave their opinions. Their words were short and to the point. Their comments were elaborations, details. None would gainsay the Warmaster's flawless strategy. None could.

Horus looked directly at Maloghurst-the-observer. His face was majestic, alive with fierce intelligence and the grand power of the warp.

'Maloghurst! You have joined us.' He addressed him as though it were perfectly normal that there were two embodiments of his equerry in attendance.

'My lord…' said Maloghurst. Confusion muddied his thoughts. A dream. He clung to the certainty of that as hard as he could. 'I am sorry.'

His double chittered an idiot chant in a forgotten language. His bloodshot eyes rolled back into his head. Black liquid ran from the edges of his respirator.

Over Horus's shoulder, the presence loomed.

This was no pillar of smoke, but Maloghurst knew it for the thing he had seen in the couriers' barracks. Long, multiple-jointed fingers stroked the fur of Horus's cloak. It crooned a song fit for the cradles of dead infants. Maloghurst stepped back.

The Warmaster fixed his full attention on him. The weight of it was unbearable.

'Is there something wrong, Mal?'

'My lord, I…'

The creature stared at him. The form of it was oily black, a liquid born of congealed smoke. A hundred eyes looked at him unblinkingly from a long, equine face. Arms that hinted at the nightmares of insects slid over each other in countless profusion.

Horus laid his hand upon Maloghurst's shoulder. 'This is not befitting of my equerry.'

'No, lord.'

'This war taxes us all, Mal.' Horus's face was neutral, the blaze of otherworldly power that possessed him burning behind unreadable eyes. He looked at Maloghurst's cane. 'Perhaps you should rest.'

'I am fine, my lord,' said Maloghurst. He stood taller in defiance of his injuries. His gaze kept sliding from Horus's face to the warp-horror standing behind him. Why did Lupercal not see it? An image of the fat logistician was projected into his mind, glancing fearfully at the Justaerin. He gasped at the invasion.

'And I say you are not fine. Stand down, equerry. Go to the Apothecaries, and have yourself examined. Then return to your quarters. Rest.'

'My lord, I am fit for my duties,' Maloghurst protested. 'When have I ever failed you?'

Horus squeezed Maloghurst's shoulder, the claws of his talon lightly scraping against the equerry's war-plate.

'Never, my friend. But then nothing fails, until the time that it does. Your time approaches.'

'My lord–'

'Do as I command!' said Horus. The change in his expression afforded Maloghurst a glimpse of what lurked behind his eyes. He took a faltering step backwards.

The daemon laughed silkily. It ran long, black arms around Horus's neck in a loving embrace.

Maloghurst looked from face to face around the gathering. Indifference, or hatred in places, greeted him. He retreated before it.

He ran, the only gait his body would allow him was a ridiculous gallop. The whine of his power amour as it attempted to match and amplify this movement sounded like mocking laughter.

He found himself in a corridor that he could not possibly reach from Lupercal's Court. Screaming faces formed in metal that had become as fluid as boiling water. The corridor convulsed, warping out of shape entirely. Maloghurst's crippled legs gave way under him and he fell. There was no floor to halt him. He plummeted into a hell of unnatural colours. A swirl of dark threads gathered into an oily scum atop the shifting ocean.

From this, the daemon rose, sucking the blackness into itself. The oil was fed by a thousand dark veins threading the warp, and so reduced only slowly.

By the time the daemon had absorbed all of the darkness, it was as big as a Battle Titan. By some trick it was suddenly below *Maloghurst.*

Come to me, Maloghurst! Be mine… Let us be one…

Maloghurst plummeted helplessly into its yawning maw.

He sat bolt upright on his pallet, forgetting the ruin of his body for a moment. The motion sent a jag of pain up his nerves that emerged from his mouth as a harsh grunt. Sweat poured off his skin. His muscles and scars were picked out by curves of dim light issued by the door lock lumen. He looked at his arm, and saw it as the daemon's oily limb. He recoiled, blinked, and then saw only his hand.

Of the thousands of articles blindly collected as war trophies aboard the *Vengeful Spirit*, few had proven to be artefacts of the true faith. Among them were certain objects of power. Maloghurst reached for one of these now.

Cold, greasy metal met his touch. His hand closed around it, and brought it to his face. A small gargoyle taken from a degenerate human world. The savage inhabitants had not possessed the technology to manufacture even this ugly thing of lead, and so its provenance was unknown. Whatever its true origins, he had found it to be an effective daemon ward. He slid back the hinged lids that covered the coloured glass of its eyes.

They glowed a warning red.

‘Neverborn,’ hissed Maloghurst.

A foul smell filled the room. He choked, saliva spilling from his wry lips.

He gulped air flavoured by nothing more than recycling systems and warm metal.

Rakshel’s lair was deep inside the ship, not far from the grand transit canyon that ran the length of the ship’s keel. These were thrall spaces, and many were long abandoned. Maloghurst passed empty dormitories, refectories full of spilled tin plates caked in decayed organic matter. Spaces where crew serfs no longer lived, their halls emptied by war. The mortal personnel manifest of the *Vengeful Spirit* ran into the tens of thousands. They swarmed the endless arterial corridors of its interior, as numerous as blood cells. And like blood cells they bled freely into the void whenever the flagship’s hull was breached.

The whispers were stronger this far below the command deck. Things flickered in the corner of one’s eye. It was better to steer clear of the dark places, even for one as strong as Maloghurst.

But today he had no choice.

Strange smells wafted on ventilation draughts – sweet and feculent, too strong to be real and too real to be dismissed. Damage suffered in the *Vengeful Spirit*’s endless battles was evident all about him. Whole sections were sealed away, bulkhead doors welded shut. Deck plating was buckled. Wrinkled walls spilled congealed waves of sealant foam like lava from volcanic cracks. There were areas where the gravity or lighting was inconstant.

Maloghurst came to a cavity hollowed from the side of the ship by a nova blast. Sheets of plain metal the size of fortress doors sealed the breach. A swaying catwalk hung from wires anchored to the mess of broken pipes and void-ice above. The tug of artificial gravity there was capricious, coming first from one direction, then another. Maloghurst grabbed the walkway’s guide rail for support and dragged himself across. The cavity glimmered with warning lights. Beneath his feet, huge servitors hauled off tons of tangled, fused debris. Arc-lightning from welding torches played, sparks showering down in yellow rains. Without a sojourn in drydock, damage like this could never be repaired, only contained. There were many such wounds along the *Vengeful Spirit*’s flanks.

He left the ragged chamber, exiting through a door into a corridor that perversely bore little sign of damage. A repair crew passed him on the way to their worksite. They were armed, armoured and in great number. A triad of Mechanicum priests led them, red augmetic eyes winking under black cowls. The rearmost of their number led a Thallax unit by warding chains upon whose links glowed runes of containment. Corposant glittered in the machine’s exhaust. A growl grumbled from the smooth faceplate at Maloghurst as he went past. The thing’s organic components were not of mundane origins.

With this Dark Mechanicum monster in their midst, still the repair team looked about warily. The armsmen that escorted them peered fearfully from behind their glass visors.

Their fear was not for him. They watched the shadows.

Among the broken decks and exhausted magazines dwelt the Davinites. Maloghurst smelled their reek a hundred metres before he came to their domain. A musty, animal scent carried on sighing breezes of the ship’s air. The odour of urine, cooking, smoke and faeces associated with any one of humanity’s rough camps pitched since the dawn of time.

The Davinites cleaved to their roots, moving periodically about the ship. Their current abode was a store emptied of all supplies – one of many. Voided of their original contents by the demands of war, they drew in new occupants, rarely benign.

The broad blast doors were open. Maloghurst went within. Davinites squatted around open fires burning directly on the deck. Their shelters were of cloth or scavenged steel plating. There had been cities on

Davin of well-ordered adobe houses, but the Primordial Truth had come from the plains tribes, and Maloghurst found himself amongst a nomad band encamped in a metal cave.

His enhanced eyes adjusted quickly to the gloom. There were thirty-one of them, the remainder of the group that had come aboard at Erebus's invitation. With their patron banished, there were fewer than there had been, but those that remained appeared unchanged by the slow alteration of the *Vengeful Spirit*. They showed little sign of the deprivation exhibited by the menials, and they behaved as though the ship were altering itself to suit them.

The Davinites ignored him. They gazed into their fires as silently as stone-age hunters of Old Earth abroad on a monster-haunted night. He made for the largest tent, expecting to find Rakshel inside. He was not disappointed.

The ambassador was sleeping, a flat-dugged Davinite female nestled into him atop a pile of ragged bedding. The ambassador had always looked ill-kempt but in comparison to his abode, his appearances in Lupercal's Court were princely.

Maloghurst jabbed at the makeshift bed with his cane. Rakshel opened one eye then the other. In the dim light, his pupils were even larger than normal.

'You came,' he said.

'You were expecting me?' asked Maloghurst. He displayed no surprise. The last few years had inured him to surprises.

'The least of us here could smell the warp-taint upon you. Yes, I expected you.'

Rakshel sat. The woman awoke and smiled at Rakshel – he nodded to the legionary by the bed. Her drowsiness rapidly left her and she leapt up, wrapping herself in a filthy blanket as she ran.

Maloghurst watched her go. 'A fine home you have made yourself, here.'

Rakshel shrugged, the gesture turned into an extravagant stretch and yawn. 'I have known hardship and this is as comfortable a place as any. Conditions here are better than for many of your servants, Twisted One. The gods provide their bounty easily to us true followers.'

Maloghurst laughed. His respirator made it a bark. 'A fine bounty.'

Rakshel rested his hairy arms on his knees. 'You are the one hounded by the Neverborn, not I. I am safe. You are not.'

'I could deny it,' said Maloghurst. 'But you are right. I see it in my dreams. I hear its voice when I am awake. A daemon of oil and smoke.'

'It is close then. Best make your peace with it – your torment in the next life might be less.'

'That is not satisfactory.'

'No?' Rakshel was enjoying himself, and made no attempt to conceal it.

'You tell me often of your mastery of the warp. Now is the time for your bragging to cease. I need deeds. You will rid me of the Neverborn.'

Rakshel pursed his lips in thought. 'Very well,' he said. 'You shall have deeds, though not mine.'

Maloghurst leaned on his cane questioningly.

'You will need someone mightier than myself. I will take you to Tsepha. He was an acolyte of Akshub, and is the greatest of us still alive.'

Rakshel climbed from his bed, unashamed by his nakedness. He held up the flap of his tent and pointed to a fire set some way from the others.

'You will find him there.'

'You will not accompany me?'

Rakshel gave Maloghurst a wide smile, shook his head, and let the tent flap drop between them.

Maloghurst picked his way around piles of rubbish and crates repurposed as furniture. The rest of the

Davinites ignored him, intent on whatever it was they saw in the dance of the flames.

There was a lone figure by the furthest fire. A filthy, near-naked standard human boy. He was covered from head to foot in arcane marks carved into his flesh. His hair had come away in clumps.

Blood-red eyes and a raspy voice gave away the boy's true nature. 'The Twisted One comes looking for help. I am honoured.'

'Tsepha? Acolyte of Akshub?'

'I am he,' said the boy.

'You are not Davinite.'

'Davinite, Terran, Cthonian… What does that matter? All souls are the same in the eyes of the gods. I accepted their truth, and I am undying – I went away, now I return. Before I was Davinite, and now I am Cthonian. How do you like my vessel?' He held up arms covered in sores. When he smiled, bloody gums showed.

'You were brought back?'

'If you wish to call it that.' The possessed boy resumed, looking into the fire. He poked at it with a human thighbone. Blue flame licked around the bulb of the femoral head. Shapes moved under his skin, mimicking the play of the flames. 'You think of your summonings. I am not the same as your Luperci. I am myself alone.'

Around the other fires silent figures squatted. Maloghurst searched them. 'Where is your mistress?'

'Gone.'

'Bring her back. I want to speak with her.'

'You cannot. She is no more. She was consumed. Erebus destroyed her. If you want help, you must ask it of me.'

'I am haunted.'

'The Neverborn attach themselves to those who show promise. You are talented, but untutored. Your master gives you more power than you can safely wield. By creating the Luperci you have opened yourself to risk. The being that dogs you senses a way in through your mind. It will happen, and it will destroy you.'

'You will help me,' said Maloghurst. It was not a question.

The boy looked up sharply, his neck twisted at an unnatural angle. 'I will? And what will the great Maloghurst do for me? You are the servant of the chosen one, but even you do not get to make demands of Tsepha.'

Maloghurst glowered down at the boy. 'Your life will be forfeit if you do not.'

The boy chuckled wetly. 'And if it is, so what? Did you not hear my previous words, noble warrior? You cannot kill me.'

Maloghurst's gauntlet dug into his cane. His other hand hovered over his dagger.

The boy glanced at it. 'A holy knife. You have learned much, but not enough.'

'You will help me,' rasped Maloghurst, 'or I will put your undying nature to the test.'

'Then you will have no help, and I will not die. Such a sad way to end a life, so full of promise, with a failed experiment. A waste of everyone's time.'

'There is a price, then?'

The boy discarded the thighbone and poked at the fire with his unprotected hand. Fatty smoke curled off blackening flesh. He showed only fascination, and no discomfort.

'We will have what we have been asking for these last months. Access to the Warmaster.'

'Why should you have it?'

'Because you will die if we do not.'

‘I am expendable,’ said Maloghurst. ‘A pawn in the game. I need a more compelling reason than my own fate.’

‘Damnation, then. You know that is what awaits you. Is that compelling enough? You argue disingenuously. Why are you here if you do not care for your own fate?’

‘I did not say that I do not care. Answer me.’

The boy got to his feet and tilted his bloody eyes upwards. Maloghurst had no knack for telling the ages of the unenhanced. Tsepha’s host was pre-adolescent, though probably not by much. Younger than the boys recruited into the Legion, perhaps? His head came as high as Maloghurst’s belt.

‘We are the people of the one true faith,’ said Tsepha. ‘It was we who opened the eyes of the Warmaster to the lies of the Emperor. How foolish you must feel, now that you also see. The lies were obvious, and the truth in plain sight. All around you was the evidence of his falsehood, and you ignored it, clinging to a creed every bit as dogmatic as those you denounced. How many times were you confronted by it? And now you are converts, with the zeal of those whose eyes are uncovered. But we are servants of the gods of old. We could teach you so much more.’

‘I have heard this offer before, not least from the serpent Erebus. You seek influence. You seek power through access to Horus Lupercal. That I cannot allow. This war is not being waged for the advantage of the cults of Davin.’

The boy shrugged. ‘Then you will die and burn forever, and we will have it anyway.’

Tsepha’s blackened hand blurred, and became pallid and unharmed again but for the weeping ritual cuts incised into the skin. Tsepha held it up and gave a bloody grin.

Maloghurst remained silent. The muttering of Davinites was curiously peaceful in the dark. There, in that metal cave, it was easy for a moment to forget exactly where he was. The whispers were absent. The presence of the millions of tonnes of the *Vengeful Spirit* all around him receded.

‘What must I do?’ he said eventually.

The boy smiled in quiet triumph. ‘Fulfil your promise. There is a ritual that can be performed. It will armour your soul against the Neverborn. Your own power will be increased. A fair bargain, I think.’

‘When?’

‘Soon. Or you will be lost. Today?’

Maloghurst grunted. ‘So be it.’

‘Then at ship’s midnight. There is a place we can use.’

The location entered into Maloghurst’s mind. *An embarkation cavity, a docking point for supply lighters a few hundred metres from their current position.*

‘I will be there.’

‘I know you will,’ said the boy.

In a circle marked carefully in blood and bone dust, Maloghurst concluded his ritual. He bowed eight times before the holy octed large upon the wall. In his hand he held a bolt shell casing on a chain. It was stoppered with black wax, sealing his own blood inside. He muttered the words that Horus himself had passed to him. The shell emitted a strange radiation not native to the material realm – when he opened his eyes, he could no longer see it. His ruined face essayed as much of a smile as it was able.

In the circle it was completely silent. Neither the noises of the ship or the whispers of the daemon-kin troubled him within its circuit. The faint tremor of the deck plates was the only reminder that he was aboard a starship at all.

The opening of the door broke his concentration. The flames on the black candles wavered.

‘Aximand,’ he said. ‘Who let you in?’

‘I am of the Mournival, Mal. I can go where I wish. Where have you been? Lupercal wants to see you.’

‘I cannot. I have matters to attend to, as you can see.’

Aximand’s eyebrows rose on his face unevenly. His features were lopsided, and somewhat grotesque under certain conditions. Once the living image of his gene-father, his mutilation should have destroyed the likeness. Somehow, it had made him look even *more* like Horus. He was a caricature of a demigod.

Both of them were twisted now, in their own way.

‘You are refusing a summons from Horus? You are bold,’ Aximand said. ‘Or is there something else going on in that labyrinthine mind of yours?’

Maloghurst rounded on him. ‘What makes you say that?’

Aximand made a face of mild surprise. ‘Perhaps not. I hear you mumbling to the gods. You are becoming as unhinged as Lorgar’s Seventeenth.’

‘You have witnessed the power that is mine to command.’

‘I have. The Luperci are impressive, Mal. But to do so much…’ Aximand looked at the trappings of Maloghurst’s ritual with a complete lack of interest. ‘We are warriors, not priests.’

‘I am no priest, Little Horus. The Luperci are a weapon. This is another.’ He held up the bolt shell on its chain.

Aximand frowned. ‘There is nothing there.’

‘There is. I cannot see it either, but I know that it is there. The power of the warp acts more effectively than any cloaking device. You too could wield such power, if you were not so narrow-minded.’

‘Narrow-minded I may be, Mal, but I’m not *stupid* enough to disobey a direct summons from Horus.’

Maloghurst gripped his cane. ‘Tell him I will attend him later.’

‘I will not. Tell him yourself.’

‘I am occupied, Aximand. Lupercal will understand.’

‘Isn’t that a little presumptuous, even for you?’

‘Our lord is party to everything that goes on aboard this ship, Little Horus. He will understand.’ Maloghurst took up a message tube and slipped the bolt shell into the tightly rolled parchment secreted within. He twisted on the end cap, activated the gene-seal, and held it out to Aximand. ‘Give these orders to Sergeant Gryben of the 43rd.’

‘I’m not your errand boy.’

‘You will do as I order, captain,’ Maloghurst said. ‘It is not a request. Tell him to open it carefully, to tip out the chain within and wear it around his neck.’

‘I did not see anything,’ said Aximand.

‘That is the point. And he will not be able to see it either. You should urge him not to lose it…’

Aximand held out his hand and took the message. ‘What did you put in here?’ he rolled the tube over. There were no marks upon it.

‘A guarantee of sorts. Do not concern yourself with it. Deliver it, and do it now. Tell no one.’

‘What are you up to, Mal?’ Aximand muttered. His curiosity was piqued.

‘You will see. Or maybe you will not. It is of no consequence. All that matters is that I will succeed.’

Maloghurst stepped out of his circle. The ceaseless growl of the *Vengeful Spirit* rumbled in his ears, and the whispers began anew.

Down in the lower decks, the whispers were not whispers at all, anymore. There were many wicked voices on the air, their words disconcertingly clear. The one that Maloghurst strained to hear was not among them. Knowing where your enemy is was far better than *not* knowing. Every voice gave him pause.

A handful of thralls and serf menials went about their business. They looked at him sidelong, wondering

why a legionary would be about in such a place so often. It was becoming easier to tell the faithful from potential traitors, for they wore their marks of devotion to the old gods, and there were more than a few whose manner betrayed their fear at the whispers. The truly faithful were perturbed, but also delighted. Only the servitors seemed unaffected, stomping about on careless feet much as they always had done.

Little matter if they were true to the Warmaster's cause or not. As long as they worked. Menials were materiel. No one cared for the opinions of a round of ammunition.

Maloghurst turned onto an access way that was only lightly used. A number of the lumens set in the ceiling had blown out, others flickered at a frequency that bothered the eye. Here, the voices blended seamlessly with the rumbles and clatters of a living starship. The *Vengeful Spirit* had found its voice.

A hatch hissed upwards in front of him. Colder air awaited. A sequence of seven small shuttle docks chained together by short lengths of corridor lay ahead. The rear walls of the hangars could be retracted, opening up the way to large loading doors that sealed supply routes heading deeper into the *Vengeful Spirit*. All were closed. There were galleries around the bays, maintenance runnels for the cranes that ran around the rooms on rails. Otherwise the hangars were featureless and utilitarian.

Maloghurst passed through four bays on the way to his destination. Each was deserted, all but one empty of craft. The long launch tubes on two showed signs of damage. Sheets of plastek, tattered from heavy use and marred with dust, wafted in ventilation breezes.

The door to the fifth bay opened, revealing chanting and rough music. The hangar wall was down and the bay was full of Davinites. Nearly their full complement, Maloghurst thought. Good. The coarse hair that furred their bodies was thick with symbols painted in blood. They stopped mid-motion, freezing whatever dance they had been performing into an eerie tableau vivant. All eyes turned to the Space Marine.

Rakshel came to him. Maloghurst's enhanced olfactory sense detected the sweet chemical signifiers of narcotics in his breath and sweat.

'You came, noble warrior.'

'Why would I not?'

Rakshel shrugged. 'You are wearing your armour.'

'I always wear it. I cannot move well without it.'

'No matter,' said Rakshel. 'We shall remove it.'

A rough octed had been set against one wall. Beaten brass, platinum etched with writhing, patterned green copper and dull iron made up the arrows of its wheel. Stout chains and manacles hung from it.

'Chaining me is not necessary,' said Maloghurst.

'Oh, but it is necessary,' Rakshel replied.

'I will not allow you to chain me.'

'Your kind know no fear. Why are you frightened? Either you are chained, or you leave.'

Maloghurst made a noise deep in his chest. 'Very well.'

Rakshel gestured to his fellows. They came forward with disarming tools, and clumsily stripped Maloghurst of his battleplate. The legionary drew in a ragged, hissing gasp as his respirator was removed. His breathing became laboured without it.

The Davinites supported his enormous bulk and guided him to the octed.

Maloghurst. Come to me.

All in the room heard the words. The Davinites looked up at their speaking.

'We must work quickly,' said Rakshel. 'The Neverborn is here!'

The manacles were snapped shut hurriedly. When the Davinites were satisfied that Maloghurst was restrained, they stepped back and leered at him. Maloghurst tugged at the links uneasily.

Warning klaxons blared. The rotating light above the left-hand loading door spun round and the door

opened, its hazard striped plasteel giving way to darkness beyond.

The born-again shaman Tsepha stepped through, the body of the boy he wore gleaming with white lime. The bloody marks of the cuts and his inhuman eyes showed through, bright crimson. He wore only a loincloth. In his hand, he bore a glassy black blade that weeped tendrils of black smoke.

'You have come. You are a fool,' gloated Tsepha. 'Twisted, the Sons of Horus name you. Twisted by their measure, but not by mine. A race of giants, bred for war. You are no subtle blade.'

The boy stepped in front of Maloghurst. With a quick slash, he opened a cut across the Space Marine's scarred torso. Maloghurst bit back a shout. The wound burned like the cold of the void.

'Horus has become a god. Every eye of the empyrean is turned upon his progress. The blood of one so valued by the Warmaster is a worthy sacrifice.'

'He will kill you all!' snarled Maloghurst. He tugged at his chains with sudden, impotent anger.

From behind Tsepha, Rakshel smiled.

'He will not. You are a pawn, you said. We all are. For the pawn, all power demands payment. Erebus knew this. But you would not listen. Now you will pay for your petty spells and your Luperci. Your time has come. Horus requires a steady hand to guide him. We will provide it.'

With a bloody grin, Tsepha began a low, guttural chant. The temperature plummeted. Behind him the Davinites began their vile dance again. A slow drumbeat set their rhythm, growing faster by steady increments.

Tsepha passed the knife before Maloghurst, jabbing downwards with it in time to his chant. Maloghurst arched his back and roared with pain at each insult. A network of cold spread across his skin, deep into his bones, a disgusting squirming accompanying it.

'MALOGHURST! I COME!' shouted the voice. And it was insubstantial no longer. This voice troubled the air, not only the soul.

A dark shape appeared at Tsepha's shoulder.

'Take this worthy sacrifice, oh Qwiltzuk-Ikar! Part the veil of the world and step through. Assume the form and flesh of Maloghurst the Twisted!'

The dark shape solidified, becoming a column of writhing smoke, then a vortex of shining black liquid. Suggestions of limbs appeared within, only to be snatched away by the endless rotation. Long pseudopods reached for Maloghurst's face.

The chained legionary began to laugh. Rakshel was amazed. Tsepha faltered.

'My turn now,' said Maloghurst. 'I thank you for the daemon's name.' He began to chant, under his breath at first, then louder and louder. A fresh incantation that blended with the Davinites' pounding drums and Tsepha's own summoning, threatening to undo it from within. The language was hard and old.

'He knows the speech of the Neverborn!' hissed Tsepha. The boy fought back, shouting louder, before gritting his teeth. Blood ran from his eyes.

'Qwiltzuk-Ikar! Qwiltzuk-Ikar! Qwiltzuk-Ikar!' shouted Maloghurst. Ancient words raced from him, driving back the questing feelers of the manifesting daemon.

Qwiltzuk-Ikar turned its attention upon Tsepha. The shaman waved his knife about threateningly, howling and barking words that should issue from no human throat.

'Gag him!' screamed Rakshel, pointing at Maloghurst.

The Davinites rushed forward. Two clamped their hands about Maloghurst's head, but he bucked and shook them off ferociously. A third carried a spiked muzzle.

Maloghurst paused in his incantation, his jaw worked and he spat full into the cultist's face. The Davinite shrieked and fell back, hands clapped to his eyes. Vinegary smoke streamed from his burning face as he fell to the floor. Another approached, but Maloghurst stopped him with a glare.

‘No!’ screamed Rakshel.

The last syllables of Maloghurst’s incantation slipped free of his twisted mouth.

Tsepha fell backwards as if struck. He cowered on the deck before the column of oil.

‘Take him,’ ordered Maloghurst.

‘Yes,’ said the daemon.

The liquid flew at Tsepha, forcing its way into his eyes, mouth, ears and nose. The possessed boy convulsed so hard that his head struck the deck and left a bloody print upon it.

Then the stolen body exploded. Wet meat, steaming in the chill of the docking bay, slapped into the walls.

Something took his place. *Neverborn.*

Qwiltzuk-Ikar unfolded itself, a gangling monstrosity twice the height of a Space Marine. Multiple arms unfolded. Fingers tipped with blade claws flexed. It shook itself free of blood like a dog coming out of a river.

‘Free. I am free,’ it hissed. ***‘And you are not my master.’***

‘What have you done?’ screamed Rakshel. ‘It is without control!’

‘I did not intend it to be controlled,’ said Maloghurst. He yanked hard on his restraints, parting the links of the chains with contemptuous ease. He stepped free from the octed. The daemon growled, lunging forwards with half a dozen arms. Maloghurst spoke the creature’s name, spat five syllables that pained him to speak, and held up his hands.

Qwilltzuk-Ikar stopped dead, roaring furiously.

The Davinites gibbered with terror, scrabbling at doors that would not open.

Rakshel backed away. Still holding out one hand to restrain the daemon, Maloghurst caught the ambassador about the neck and hauled him off his feet.

‘You were a fool to underestimate me, Davinite,’ he growled. ‘Squad Gryben! Reveal yourselves.’

All around the gallery, reality warped. Fifteen Sons of Horus stood with their bolters trained upon the daemon and the panicking cultists.

‘How could you think this ridiculous scheme would work, Rakshel?’ said Maloghurst. ‘Summoning a daemon to trouble me day and night, then intending to have it claim me on the pretext of your aid? How could a degenerate mortal like you outwit a Son of Horus? Your scheme depends upon fear, Rakshel.’ Maloghurst pulled the ambassador in closer. ‘And we know *no* fear.’

Rakshel drew in a rattling breath, unable to respond.

‘A cripple I might be among my kind, but I exceed you in every regard,’ said Maloghurst.

Qwiltzuk-Ikar screamed, chattering dire threats in every language ever spoken. Maloghurst clawed his right hand and squeezed the air, and the daemon squealed in agony. He returned his attention to Rakshel.

‘I deny your request for an audience with the Warmaster one final time. With your death.’

Slowly, Maloghurst squeezed Rakshel’s throat shut. The Davinite thrashed madly at the arm holding him, windmilling legs kicking pathetically at his tormentor’s side. Maloghurst grimaced with pleasure as Rakshel’s last breath turned into a death rattle.

‘Gryben, open fire!’ he shouted.

All sound was obliterated beneath the thunder of fifteen bolters firing simultaneously.

Davinites exploded. Their limbs slithered across the frost-coated metal. Gore splashed, drenching Maloghurst and Rakshel. The daemon screeched, furious to be denied its part in the slaughter.

Gryben’s squad turned their weapons upon Qwiltzuk-Ikar. It writhed as round after round disappeared into it. Explosions sent bursts of black ichor slashing out to mix with the red. It whipped back and forth. Its limbs were parted from its body, landing on the floor where they sublimated into noisome vapour.

The barrage was too much, and it fell. Qwiltzuk-Ikar's warp-formed body snapped and writhed upon deck plating slick with frozen blood. Half of Gryben's squad had descended from the maintenance gallery and were advancing upon it, pumping it full of mass-reactive rounds, pausing only to change their empty magazines.

It attempted to get up, the unnatural vitality of the warp pulling its broken body back together, but its reforming limbs were shot out from under it again and again. It collapsed and did not rise.

Maloghurst threw down Rakshel's corpse. 'Enough!' he shouted.

The din of bolter fire ceased. The reverberations took an age to die. There was not a living thing left in the room that was not a legionary. He limped over to the daemon, and pinned its neck in place with his foot. Eyes swam beneath the surface of night-black skin, opening at random across its long face. Shadowy tendrils waved out over every wound, seeking their fellows to grasp and pull, knitting the hurts together. They were growing feebler and feebler.

'I do not account myself a great sorcerer, Neverborn. But I am fortunate to have a master who is willing to share a portion of his knowledge.' Maloghurst held out his hand. A bolt pistol was pressed into it. 'In several of the very diverse sources I have read, it is written that whenever a fiend is dispatched from the material realm, it spends one hundred years and a day in torment before it might come forth again.'

Maloghurst racked a bolt into the pistol's chamber. A cold amusement entered his eyes as he aimed the gun at the creature. Qwiltzuk-Ikar was diminishing, shrinking in size and potency, its body streaming away in smoke. It was once the size of a man, now only a child. Only the head remained undiminished, large and freakish upon the nub of its body.

'We will bargain!' hissed the fiend. ***'You shall have powers undreamed. You shall no longer be known as the Twisted, but the Mighty! I can heal you. I can make you whole.'***

'Don't you see?' said Maloghurst. 'I value the sobriquet and the state of my body equally. Why would I wish to enslave you in exchange for more? You would be close to Horus, which was your aim. I am not like these simpletons, to believe the promises of daemonkind. Spend the next one hundred years and a day considering this – you wish to master us, but it is we who shall master you.'

A round from Maloghurst's gun pulped its head, and black ooze spread around it. The stench of mud dragged from noisome waters enveloped them all, and then it was gone.

The Davinite corpses were stuck with combat blades, and turned over by careless, crushing boots.

'They are all dead, my lord,' said Gryben.

Maloghurst nodded his approval. He haltingly retrieved his cane and then, better supported, headed swiftly for the loading gates. He chose the same one through which Tsepha had entered. It was fitting. There was power in even the smallest gesture.

'Send this thing back to warp,' he ordered.

A legionary with a flamer stepped forward and the others fell back, carrying the pieces of Maloghurst's stripped battleplate. The warrior waited for his fellows to leave, then filled the room with fire. He retreated out of the bay and Maloghurst thumbed the door shut.

After letting it burn for a full minute, he opened the launch tube's doors and vented the hangar into space.

Maloghurst threw a cloth bundle upon the table. It came unwrapped, scattering a score of daggers across the surface. No two were alike: knapped stone, sharpened scrap and finely-forged antiques were all among their number. Each one glistened with forbidden power.

'The blades of the traitors, sire.'

'It is done?'

'It is done.'

Horus stared at them. Always awesome, the power that the Warmaster held surrounded him with an aura of godly might. He was made to be an exemplar of humanity, but he had transcended the state of man completely. He would exceed the ambitions of the Emperor a thousand times over. For one long moment, Maloghurst was gripped by the unshakeable certainty that should the two meet again, father and son, then the Emperor would bend his knee to Horus and beg for forgiveness.

The sensation lasted as long as Maloghurst could endure to look upon the face of his primarch. Since Horus's following of the Fulgurine Road, that was not long. For decades Maloghurst had been one of the few who could treat with Lupercal on something approaching equal terms. Those days were past.

'What was its name?' asked Horus.

'The Davinite called it Qwiltzuk-Ikar. In all probability this was one of its *nomina major*, possibly a name of essence. Enough, once I had it, to bend it to my will. It was a petty thing, its plans to influence you far beyond its ability.'

'Threats from the Neverborn must be dealt with as surely as those posed by mortals, insignificant or not.' Horus picked up a short knife in his hand and turned it over. 'You employed a ritual of concealment.'

'Good against mortal and immortal alike, sire.'

'You are a swift study.'

'My ability is nothing compared to yours, sire.'

'Of course not, Mal,' said Horus. He smiled. 'But it is sufficient. Have the name recorded. Let all who truck with the warp in our service know of it, and be forbidden from treating with Qwiltzuk-Ikar.'

'The denizens of the empyrean will learn to respect you.'

'The White Scars. The Sigillite. Garviel Loken… and now this. The attempts made upon my life by my father's lackeys are tiresome enough. I will not have the Neverborn acting against me also. I am my own master.'

'Yes, sire.'

Horus set the knife down, and picked up another. He made a dismissive noise at its quality. 'I am sorry for the humiliation you had to endure, Mal.'

Maloghurst's words stuck in his throat. Two more attempts were required before he could voice them. The resplendence of Horus unmanned him.

'There is no humiliation. Never in serving you.'

'That is what I expect you to say, Mal, but it does no harm for me to let you know that your service is valued.'

Maloghurst leaned upon his cane and bowed slightly. The pride at his master's words was almost enough to overcome his sorrow at the distance growing between them.

But not quite.

'Thank you, sire.'

Horus's attention drifted from the blade in his hand. 'Is there something wrong, Mal?'

'No, my lord. With your permission, I will return to my duties.'

'You have it, as always.'

Maloghurst turned painfully and departed the stateroom, the rap of his cane on the stone echoing away down the corridor.

WOLF MOTHER

Graham McNeill

A cruel smile played over Xisan's purple-stained lips as the woman stumbled. She looked up with terrified eyes.

'Please, my daughter, she–'

Xisan backhanded his fist across her face.

'You don't get to speak.'

She spat blood and looked up from the deck with hate.

Xisan laughed. He'd discovered her in a darkened sub-transit of *Molech's Enlightenment*, calling the girl's name and frantic with dread.

Too good an opportunity to ignore.

She'd run to him, eyes wet with tears. Hoping for help.

Xisan had been tasked with finding children, but with the warship overburdened with refugees fleeing the Warmaster's victory on Molech, finding anyone alone was a gift.

He'd clubbed her to the ground and bound her wrists with baling twine before administering a hypo loaded with soporific venom. Not enough to put her out completely, just enough to render her compliant.

She begged in slurred fragments, not for her own life, but that of her daughter. Perhaps she knew, with the psychic womb-tether of mothers, that he'd been the one who'd taken her.

Her fear energised Xisan. It *empowered* him.

He remembered the girl. Vivyen, she'd called herself.

The Serpent Gods favoured innocence in those offered unto them, but in such times of tribulation all offers of flesh were welcome.

Shargali-Shi would be pleased to have a mother and daughter to offer the Serpent Gods. Those linked by blood were a greater prize than strangers.

He ignored the woman's slurred protests as he dragged her through the hidden pathways of the ship. Down into the darkness below the waterline. Down to where Shargali-Shi awaited.

The Ophiolater heard the sibilant voices of the Serpent Gods in his venom-fugues and spread their wisdom among the *Vril-yaal*. Only a very few of the chosen people had escaped aboard *Molech's Enlightenment*, and they used the darkness to rebuild, to renew their faith.

House Devine had fallen on Molech, but enough of the Vril-yaal remained to carry their faith to the stars. Such times of trial were necessary, claimed Shargali-Shi, for only through such testing would true strength emerge.

The woman's fear increased the deeper they delved into the creaking, lightless bilges of *Molech's Enlightenment*. Rusted ductwork gurgled and moaned, exhaling reeking steam and sweating foetid liquids; the bowels of the vessel in all senses of the word.

Some of the Vril-yaal claimed to hear this darkness mutter or that inhuman shadows moved in the

silences between breaths. Xisan once thought he'd caught a glimpse of a giant in grey with frost-blue eyes. He never knew if that had been something real or the result of the many ergots he'd ingested.

The woman suddenly stopped, eyes wide, brow furrowed.

'No,' she said. 'Don't you dare.'

'You don't get to speak,' said Xisan again.

Something slammed into the deck plates behind him. Something with mass and density to buckle sheet metal.

He spun around in time to see a vast shape filling the transit. Faint slivers of light reflected from burnished plate emitting a sub-aural buzz that set his teeth on edge. Xisan smelled caustic lapping powders and oily sweat.

He heard bellows breath like that of hormone-bulked livestock.

'And you don't get to live,' growled the giant.

A glittering blade rammed into Xisan's gut, punching out through his spine. The giant twisted the sword and hooked out Xisan's bowels. His intestines followed, splattering the deck like mortuary slops.

He dropped to his knees, aghast at the life-ending quantities of blood leaving him. The woman stood over him, all traces of fear gone. Inexplicably, she now held a gun pointed at his head, a weapon of chromed steel with the inlaid form of a white snake coiled around the barrel.

'Don't you die on me, damn you,' she said, all traces of the slurred pleading tones erased from her voice. Her eyes were clear, honed like razors.

She held his dying body upright, the warm anodized steel of the cannon's barrel pressed hard into his neck.

'Where's Vivyen?' demanded the woman. 'Where's my daughter? Tell me and I'll end you quickly.'

Xisan grinned through a mouthful of blood.

Alivia Sureka kicked the corpse to the deck and turned her weapon on the armoured Space Marine who'd disembowelled him. She thumbed back the hammer as he took a step forward. He made no sound, surely an impossibility for one of his kind.

'Why the hell did you have to kill him?' she said, keeping the sights centred on his bare head. Space Marine or not, one bullet would carve a canyon through his skull.

'You're welcome,' he said.

'I needed him alive.'

He grinned. 'You mean you *weren't* his helpless prisoner?'

Alivia sighed and waggled the gun barrel. 'Hardly.'

'Looked like you were.'

'That's what I needed him to think.'

'And why was that?'

'He took my daughter,' said Alivia, her voice almost cracking at the thought of this bottom-feeding predator's coven holding Vivyen. 'He was taking me to his lair.'

'Ah, so you let yourself be captured.'

'You catch on quick,' said Alivia as the warrior bent to clean his blade on the dead man's tunic. A golden-hilted gladius, fashioned for transhuman hands, and yet it seemed a small weapon for one so powerful. Alivia had seen plenty of Space Marines in the course of her existence, but the sheer inhuman scale of them never failed to disgust her.

Of all His creations, she disliked them the most.

This one was bearded with a scalp of close-cropped auburn hair. His worn-leather skin was heavily

scarred from recent combat. Dark tattoos of curved blades and blood drops painted his cheeks. Gang markings, serpentine around his eyes and brow. Indistinct in the shadow, but chillingly familiar.

An ash-dulled bolt pistol was mag-locked to his thigh, and strapped to the opposite hip was a serrated combat blade and a grenade harness. Alivia saw three explosive canisters buckled in the loops.

'That's an interesting weapon you have,' he said, rising to his full height and ramming the gladius into a cobalt-blue sheath at his belt.

'I could say the same thing,' countered Alivia, sensing the power unwittingly bound to the blade. 'That's no ordinary line weapon. It's shed some potent blood.'

'And that's no ordinary gun.'

'It's a Ferlach serpenta,' said Alivia.

The Space Marine nodded. 'Nice.'

'Crafted by the lady herself to my exact specifications.'

'Unlikely.'

'How so?' asked Alivia.

'Theresia Ferlach died in the Burning of Carinthia.'

'And you know that how?'

'I set the fire that burned her weapon forges.'

Alivia applied fractionally more pressure to the trigger.

'Who are you?' she asked. 'And how does a Space Marine come to be aboard this ship?'

'I'm Severian,' he said with a feral grin, the tattooed blades twisting on his gnarled skin. And Alivia finally remembered where she'd seen his gang markings before – the last time she had truly feared for her life.

'Cthonia…' she said. 'You're a Son of Horus.'

Alivia pulled the trigger.

The room was cold and moisture dripped from the rusty hooks hanging from the ceiling. Moisture and corrosion slathered its walls in blooms of clotted yellow and mould green.

Vivyen had thought her family's spot beneath the air vent on the starboard radial was unpleasant, but this place was *really* horrible. She sat against the wall across from the barred door with her knees drawn up tight. Shivering, frightened breath misted on her blue lips.

Including herself, seven bewildered children were being held in the room, ranging from Ivalee and Oskar, who were eleven, to Uriah, who said he was seventeen. Vivyen thought he was probably only fourteen, but he seemed to like being the oldest, so she didn't argue with him.

A while ago there had been ten of them, but then two women, one with burned out eyes and another with purple-stained lips, came and took them away. Vivyen wondered what they wanted the children for, but they never came back. She could only guess, but all those guesses made her want to close her eyes and cry.

The twins, Challis and Vesper, had been crying and reciting prayers to the God-Emperor since they got here. Uriah paced back and forth, flapping his arms to keep warm. He muttered under his breath, but Vivyen couldn't hear what he was saying. Something angry probably. Like the missionary he'd been named after, Uriah was always angry.

Vivyen missed her daddy and Miska. She missed Alivia. And even though they weren't family, she missed Noama and Kjell. They'd kept them alive on the road from Larsa to Lupercalia, and according to Alivia, that made them better than a lot of real families.

When the orbital shuttle left Molech without Alivia, Vivyen had cried herself dry, so when her mother –

in all but biology – came back to them it was the happiest she could remember being. Alivia had said things would be okay, and for a time they were.

Until the man with the purple lips had taken Vivyen.

Oskar huddled in close beside her, his eyes twitching beneath their lids. Vivyen held his hand. Oskar was younger than her, which made him practically a baby to her worldly twelve years.

'He having another nightmare?' asked Lalique, her head resting on Vivyen's other shoulder.

'Yes, I think so,' said Vivyen.

Lalique's breath was pleasantly warm on her neck. It was Vivyen's turn to be in the middle and she hated how glad she was that Oskar was still asleep. As soon as he woke it would be Lalique's turn to enjoy the meagre warmth between them.

'I hope he wakes soon,' said Lalique. 'I'm cold.'

Vivyen sighed, wishing she had Miska's talent for putting her own comfort first. 'Don't worry, I know how to get up without waking someone who's asleep.'

'You can do that?'

'My sister's always falling asleep on me,' explained Vivyen, easing away from Oskar and using her free hand to hold him upright. Lalique slid gratefully into the middle as they swapped places.

'You're the best, Vivyen,' said Lalique with a brittle smile. Her friend, if she could call someone she'd just met in a meat-locker cell a friend, was the daughter of a glass-blower who once crafted fantastical, spun-sugar confections for Molech's noble houses. She said that several of his creations had pride of place in the House Devine's towers.

Judging by her clothes, her father had been wealthy, but Vivyen guessed it had been used up to buy them passage on *Molech's Enlightenment*. Whatever she'd been before, Lalique was now alone and frightened, just like the rest of them.

'I wish they'd shut up,' said Lalique, casting a venomous glance towards the praying twins. 'I grew out of those kinds of prayers by the time I was seven.'

Vivyen shrugged. 'I like them,' she said. 'They're about the only comfort any of us has left.'

'What about that book I saw you looking at?' said Lalique. 'If it's a chapbook, maybe you could read us a story?'

Vivyen felt a stab of protectiveness towards the book tucked inside her dress. Alivia had given it to her and said it was a very special book. It wasn't new or even valuable, but it was *hers*. The stories were written in a dead language, but that didn't matter. Vivyen knew them all off by heart and could recite any one of them at will.

The idea of sharing it seemed dangerous until she realised that she *wanted* to read a story. Or was it that they wanted to *be* read? Stories had always helped her feel less scared and if sharing one with the others would make them feel better, then that's what she'd do.

'Does anyone want to hear a story?' she asked.

Uriah glowered at her. 'Don't you think we've got enough to worry about without hearing your baby stories?'

'Shut up, Uriah,' said Lalique. 'What else have we got to do?'

'Look for a way out,' said the boy through bared teeth.

Lalique pointed to the door. 'There's the way out. Don't see you getting through it any time soon, though.'

'I'd like to hear one,' said Ivalee with a shy smile.

'Me too,' mumbled Oskar, clearly not as asleep as he'd appeared.

'Fine,' said Uriah. 'Tell your bloody story.'

They gathered around her. Lalique was still in the middle and Oskar on the other side of her. Challis and

Vesper were in front with Ivalee between them.

Vivyen reached inside her dress and pulled out the book. More crumpled than it had been before, its pages were yellowed and textured with age. She had no idea how old the book was, and Alivia had just winked when she'd asked.

'What's the story called?' asked Challis.

'Yes, what's the story?' echoed her twin.

'I don't know,' said Vivyen, thumbing the pages. 'I never pick a story, I just look for one that wants to be read.'

'Don't be stupid,' said Uriah. 'Stories don't *want* to be read. They're just words on a page.'

'Of course they want to be read,' said Vivyen. 'What's the point of being a story if no one reads to you?'

Uriah didn't answer and kept pacing with his arms wrapped across his chest, but Vivyen saw he was waiting for her to start. She scanned the swift-turning pages until the book fell open at a picture of a fat-bellied man in a parade. He had no clothes on and everyone was laughing at him.

'This is a good one,' said Vivyen, and she told them all the tale of a foolish emperor, who was convinced by two swindlers that they had fashioned a magical garment, one that only those of keen intellect could see. The hopelessly stupid and unimaginative would be unable to appreciate its – and by association the emperor's – majesty. Of course all the emperor's courtiers, not wishing to be thought stupid, claimed their master's new clothes were magnificent beyond imagining.

And so the emperor paraded before his subjects to show off his new clothes. The people, who by now had heard the swindlers' claims, also cheered the naked emperor and told him how grand he looked.

All was well until one little boy, courageous enough to speak out, cried that the emperor wasn't wearing anything at all. And the spell, for such it was, was broken and the crowds howled with laughter as the emperor fled to his castle, red-faced in shame.

Vivyen finished the story, her eyes refocusing as she lifted them from the page. It felt like the words were rearranging themselves on the page. Sometimes they did that.

The faces around her were smiling, stronger now, and Vivyen smiled back at them, pleased she'd given them hope and fresh courage. Even Uriah looked less angry, more defiant.

'Another!' said Vesper, clapping her hands.

'Yes, read one more,' added Challis.

'Okay,' said Vivyen.

'What's "okay"?' asked Lalique.

'It's an old word Alivia used to say to me,' said Vivyen. 'It sort of means yes, but sometimes it can mean that things aren't bad either or that they'll get better.'

Oskar rose to his feet as the door opened, fists gathered at his side. Vivyen's heart leapt, imagining that Alivia would be standing there with her silver gun with the white snake etched into the metal. Smoke would be curling from it and she'd cock a hip and say something that would tell Vivyen that, yes, things *were* going to be okay.

But it wasn't Alivia, it was a man in a long white tunic. Like the women before him, he had been mutilated. His skin was scarred, one eye burned out, and his lips were an unhealthy purple. He carried a dirty knife that dripped with something yellowish.

The children screamed and scrambled into the corner of the room. They whimpered and cried as the man swept his one good eye over them, like a buyer at a meat market. Even Uriah's anger vanished in the face of naked terror.

'You,' he said, pointing at Vivyen. 'Come now.'

Vivyen shook her head, too frightened to answer.

‘*Now*.’

‘No,’ said Vivyen, remembering the courage of the little boy in the story she’d just read.

‘I will hurt you,’ he promised, lifting the knife.

‘I’ll hurt you back,’ said Vivyen. ‘You’ll cut me with that knife, I know that, but not before my nails scratch out that last eye of yours.’

The man considered her words, then grinned.

‘I expect you would,’ he said.

Vivyen wanted to let all the air in her lungs out in one explosive breath. Relief turned to horror when she saw the man wasn’t admitting defeat, he was just going to take someone else. He took three powerful strides and grabbed Challis’s scrawny arm, wrenching her from the huddled group of children.

‘No!’ screamed Uriah. ‘Don’t!’

The boy threw himself at the man. Uriah was big for his age, but was still just a child against a full-grown man. The knife bit flesh and Uriah fell with a howl of pain.

Blood squirted from his shoulder and the children screamed at the sight.

‘You don’t want to go? Fine, I’ll take this one instead,’ said the man.

He dragged Challis from the room and slammed the door behind him, leaving the six remaining children to their misery. Vesper fell to the floor, weeping and shrieking at the loss of her twin. Oskar and Lalique knelt with Uriah, their faces wet with tears. Ivalee stood silent and uncomprehending.

Vivyen felt as though the man’s knife had stabbed her in the gut. She looked at Vesper’s curled, sobbing form and guilt settled upon her like a lead weight.

She looked down the book, but the words were meaningless.

They had no comfort to offer her, not now.

‘Please, Alivia,’ sobbed Vivyen. ‘Please help us.’

Alivia’s feet dangled a metre off the deck. The Space Marine gripped her neck in one fist, the wrist of her gun hand in the other. He could break both in an instant.

‘That hurt,’ he said, bleeding from the side of his skull where her bullet had creased him.

‘It was meant to kill you,’ gasped Alivia.

‘You’re fast, I’ll grant you that, but Yasu’s the only mortal I’d credit with a chance of seeing my blood. Even Loken didn’t get a shot.’

‘Who?’

‘Another son of Cthonia.’

‘Another traitor.’

Severian sighed as though disappointed.

‘In another life, I’d already have killed you and been half a kilometre away,’ he said. ‘But I fight on the side of the angels now, and behaviour that was as natural to me as breathing is… frowned upon.’

Severian fractionally tightened his grip. ‘So tell me, who are you? Who are you *really*?’

Alivia’s eyes bulged at the pressure.

‘Alivia,’ she said between snatched gasps. ‘Alivia Sureka, I’m looking for my daughter.’

She felt his disbelief, as palpable as cold or pain. Just as she felt truth and fresh purpose in his bones, their fit still new and chafing against old instincts.

Severian leaned in, his bearded, tattooed face millimetres from hers, and sniffed her like an animal. He shook his head and his cold eyes flicked down to her flat belly.

‘You’re no mother,’ he said. ‘That womb is as barren as Cthonia’s surface.’

Alivia blinked in surprise, now seeing what lay beyond the savagery his murder-gang tattoos suggested:

an agile mind, predator's patience and a hardwired hunter's instinct. Alloyed to a psychic presence entirely unlike the blunt, sledgehammer minds possessed by some among the Legions.

'My adopted daughter,' she said, resisting the urge to give her words a psychic push. The inside of Severian's mind was a steel trap of jagged edges, just waiting to snap shut.

'That's better,' said Severian.

She eased the serpenta's hammer down and relaxed her grip, letting the gun hang by the trigger guard from her forefinger.

'Good girl,' said Severian, lowering her to the deck and plucking the weapon from her hand.

'I want that back,' said Alivia, massaging her bruised neck.

'So you can shoot me again?'

'I'm not going to shoot you, Severian,' she said.

'You're damn right you're not.'

'I won't shoot you because you're going to help me.'

Severian laughed.

'Something tells me you're not the kind of person who normally needs help.'

'True, but I want you to help me now.'

'Why?'

'Because we both answer to the same master.'

Severian's eyes narrowed and she sensed his frank reappraisal. His instincts were telling him there was more to her than met the eye. That she was dangerous. He'd thought she was simply fast, but now he knew better. He didn't know what she was – how could he? – but he was curious.

And for someone like Severian, that was enough.

'So we're going to find your daughter?' he said.

Alivia nodded.

'How do you know she isn't just lost?'

'Because *he* told me,' said Alivia. 'He took her last night and I don't think she was his first. And unless I find where these monsters are hiding, more children will be taken.'

She knelt over the corpse and spat in its face. 'He'd have led me right to them if you hadn't killed him.'

Severian shrugged and took a knee beside her. He turned the dead man's head in his hand. The slack features were no longer curled in a rictus grin of mockery. Blood still dribbled over his purple lips.

'What is it?' said Alivia. 'Some form of chronic hypoxia?'

'Maybe, but I doubt it,' said Severian, bending over the man, as though about to give him the kiss of life. Alivia grimaced as the tip of his tongue flicked over the dead man's lips. The legionary swirled the taste around his mouth before spitting the tainted saliva onto the wall. It smoked as it slid down the steel panel.

'What is it?' asked Alivia. 'A narcotic?'

'Yes, and a powerful one too. A blend of some kind of ergot and distilled serpent venom,' said Severian.

'Will that help you track where he came from?'

'It might,' said Severian. 'There's a quicker way, but you won't like it.'

'If it helps find Vivyen, then I'll like it.'

'Fair enough, but I warn you it's not pretty.'

Severian's fist stabbed downwards, fingers extended like a blade. He struck the side of the dead man's head, splitting the bone with precise force. Severian spread his fingers, levering open the vault of the skull and exposing the pink-grey ooze within. He tossed away the hair-covered bone and dug his fingertips into the wet, pliable meat of the brain.

Alivia knew what was coming; a barbaric custom from millennia ago, resurrected by science and made

to work as ancient warriors believed it worked. That had always been His gift, grafting fresh purpose to martial customs and bending them to his will.

She forced herself not to look away as Severian scooped out a handful of jelly-like brain matter. He sniffed it and baulked at the smell and texture.

'What?' he said, seeing her surprise. 'It's something we can do, but do you really think we *enjoy* it? The things we see, they never go away. Ever.'

'Please,' said Alivia. 'If there was any other way…'

Severian sighed and closed his eyes, pushing the brain meat into his mouth. He chewed for an entire minute before finally swallowing it.

His eyes snapped open, but they were glassy and unfocused, like an opiate-fiend or false prophet in a fugue state. His mouth hung slack and Alivia felt her gorge rise at the sight of bloody morsels stuck in his teeth.

'Severian?'

He doubled over and puked onto the deck. Alivia covered her mouth and nose at the ammoniac reek as Severian spat and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'Did you see where they are?' she asked.

Severian nodded and gripped his golden-hilted gladius. Alivia saw its ivory pommel was worked with a cobalt-blue company number enclosed by a wreath. A blade of the XIII Legion.

'I saw them.'

A lump formed in Alivia's throat. 'Is Vivyen alive?'

'Yes.'

Relief flooded her, swiftly followed by more anguish at the terseness of Severian's reply.

'Are they hurting her? Is is bad?'

'It's worse than you know,' said Severian. 'It's the warp.'

Until the revelation of the White Naga, Shargali-Shi had always viewed suffering as something to be visited upon others. He had shunned pain, taking ever more exotic compounds to dull his senses to its fiery balm.

The Serpent Gods' revelations had changed him in ways too numerous to believe, but chief among them was a craving for ever more extreme sensation. No debasement could be too degrading, no pain too sublime, and no violation so grossly beyond the mores of civilisation for him to forego. He had transcended all limitations of mortal flesh, blending the Sacristans technology with the flesh-alchemy of serpents.

Secretly wise, serpents held the keys to immortality.

What other species could shed its skin and yet live?

Their venoms were sacred fluids, opening the mind to realms of perception only madmen knew, every toxic droplet imparting knowledge wrung from each brush with death's kingdom.

His beloved Lyx had known that.

Her treacheries had crippled her first husband, a man whose hate-filled blood wrought venoms of terrifying lethality and beauty. Her lusts had brought him her last husband, a host of battle Knights and the resources of an entire planet.

But Lyx was dead and the Warmaster now claimed Molech as his prize. He had cursed Horus Lupercal until *Molech's Enlightenment* plunged into the empyrean and the designs of the Serpent Gods became clear.

Shargali-Shi was to be their prophet of doom, the blade carrying venomous seed to Terra and poisoning

the well at the Imperium's heart.

Hot and humid as a rainforest, moisture filled the arched chamber in which he had established his Serpent House. It dripped from the reticulated girders overhead and glistened on corroded pillars. It sweated from the hundreds of writhing bodies laid before him, their limbs intertwined.

Watching over the debauched flesh-revels were half a dozen Thallaxii: armoured cybernetics with featureless, brushed-steel heads enclosing agonised scraps of excised nervous systems. Once bound to House Devine, they now served the will of the Serpent Gods, and emerald corposant played across the fangs of their lightning guns. If he listened hard enough, he could hear the lunatic screaming of the Thallaxii within their armoured prisons.

Shargali-Shi hung suspended above all, his skeletal limbs splayed like an ancient crucified god. His flesh was the hue of mouldered vellum, clinging to wasted limbs and bones reduced to viscous sludge. Borne aloft like a grotesque marionette, he hung upon wires attached to clattering pulleys and barbed hooks that stretched his pallid skin taut in tattered flaps. A translucent womb-sac extruded from his bloated abdomen, its contents twitching with undulant life.

His face was an ovoid dome with distended jaws and crooked teeth that drooled venom. Blinded by milky cataracts, his prodigious mind saw all and sustained him when every law of nature sought to claim his tormented flesh.

He knew agony with every hissing breath, but he accepted the pain, transformed it into an act of devotion to the powers that dwelled in the night. The White Naga had taught him how to use that pain, to turn it inwards and reach beyond the veil to the realm where the Serpent Gods dwelled.

Smuggled aboard the warship in the last days of the battle for Molech by men of influence in thrall to his cult, Shargali-Shi had drawn ever closer to his gods. As the vessel ploughed the furrows of the immaterial ocean, he heard their hissing secrets in every sigh of submission, every scream of bliss, every blood-choked death rattle.

An auspicious time was approaching. The movement in the taut womb-sac grew frantic as the life within sensed the imminence of its birth.

'Yes, my child,' hissed Shargali-Shi. 'The Chosen Six will be yours, and the White Naga will claim their envenomed flesh. It shall sculpt their forms anew that they might bear the radiance of its divine form.'

Severian led them deeper into the nightmare, into the bowels of the warship, as he followed splintered memories plucked from a dead man's skull. An inexact map, they took many wrong turns, and doubled back frequently. Alivia tried not to let her frustration show, knowing what it had cost him to eat the flesh of a corrupted soul.

Below the waterline was a place to be feared, even on a ship as illustrious as *Molech's Enlightenment*.

Here, scum sank to the bottom.

Scav-tech gangs of bilge rats shadowed their every step, but their fear of Severian kept even the most desperate from attacking.

For that alone Alivia was glad of his presence.

Deeper and deeper they went, silently crossing decks where the broken servitors prowled, mindlessly enacting ritualised functions they could no longer perform. They bypassed sealed vaults where lethal radiation was slowly wearing away protective wards. They covered their ears as they traversed abandoned machine-temples where corrupt code burbled heresies of Old Night.

Alivia kept hold of the Ferlach serpenta, her finger curled around the trigger and the safety off.

'Did Theresia Ferlach really make that gun?' asked Severian.

'She did,' said Alivia, deciding to intercept what she knew was coming. 'And yes, that was a hundred

and eighty-seven years ago.'

Severian took this in his stride. 'So that makes you over two hundred years old.'

'It does,' replied Alivia.

'But I'm guessing that's not even close to the truth.'

'It's not, but do you really want to know?'

'No, keep your secrets,' said Severian. 'The galaxy's more interesting that way.'

Despite the strangeness of the situation, Alivia felt herself warming to Severian.

'So how does one of the Warmaster's sons end up, what was it you said, on the side of the angels? And in unmarked armour?'

Severian didn't answer, and Alivia thought he wasn't going to until he said, 'There was an Ecclesiarch of Old Earth who once said "treason is just a matter of dates".'

'What does that mean?'

'When the Luna Wolves needed to decide something, it was customary for us to draw lots,' said Severian. 'For command of a speartip, the composition of an honour guard and suchlike. When it came time for Horus Lupercal to send a warrior to join the Crusader Host, it was my name that was drawn.'

'You didn't want to go?'

'What do you think?' said Severian. 'To leave the Crusade? To sit out the greatest war-making the human race has ever waged in some gilded palace on Terra? Of course I didn't want to go, but what choice did I have? My primarch had given me an order, I *had* to obey.'

Alivia felt a creeping dread settle upon her as the relevance of the long-dead Ecclesiarch's quote became clear.

'Tell me,' said Severian. 'Have you ever seen Horus Lupercal?'

Alivia nodded stiffly. 'I met him once,' she said, a shuddering breath escaping her at the memory.

The Warmaster's cursed blades shearing her spine and shattering her ribs. Her blood flowing out onto the black gate. His last words to her…

You shouldn't put your faith in saints…

'Then you'll know that it's next to impossible to refuse him,' continued Severian. 'Little Horus Aximand once said the only way he ever remembered what he was about to say was to look at Lupercal's feet. Catch his eye, and your mind would go utterly blank.'

Severian paused before continuing, as though weighing the cost of where the path of his life had taken him.

'I wasn't there when my brothers of the Sixteenth turned, but I'd always thought that if I *had* been…'

'What?' asked Alivia, when he didn't go on. 'That you'd still be with them?'

'No, that I maybe I could have stopped it,' said Severian. 'Then I look at Loken and think it's probably just as well I wasn't.'

Severian grunted, a sound that was part anguish, part amusement at the cosmic joke the universe had played upon him.

'You ask how I came to be on the side of the angels. Luck.'

'That's not true, Severian,' said Alivia with insight that came not from her abilities, but from the pain in Severian's words. 'And you know it. You came to Molech to stop the Warmaster, didn't you?'

'I never set foot on Molech,' replied Severian.

'Then why are you here?'

The Luna Wolf shook his head. 'Like I said, the galaxy is a more interesting place with a few secrets left to it.'

They huddled in the corner of the meat locker farthest from the door, six frightened children clinging to the last shreds of courage Vivyen's story had given them.

Vivyen thought Uriah was still alive, but she didn't know for sure. She'd seen his eyelids flutter not long ago, though she had heard dead people sometimes twitched and burped after they'd died, so maybe that didn't mean very much.

Oskar and Lalique had tied some cloth around the boy's shoulder. It was soaked with blood and his skin was white, like a ghost.

'Why are they doing this?' said Ivalee for the hundredth time. 'What did we do wrong?'

'Nothing,' said Lalique. 'We didn't do anything.'

'Then why are they hurting us? We must have done *something*.'

Lalique had no answer for the youngster and Vivyen hated these men who'd taken them more than ever. Even if they somehow managed to escape this cell, the damage had already been done. Ivalee's innocence had been stripped away and replaced with a twisted sense that she was to blame for what was happening.

'This isn't your fault,' said Vivyen, trying to copy the same tone Alivia used whenever she *really* wanted to make herself clear. 'It's not *any* of our faults. Mama told me that some people are broken inside, and that makes them like doing bad things. It's like a sickness or something. When bad people do hurtful things to us, it's *them* we need to blame. Even if they didn't start out bad, what they're doing to us is wrong, so I want you to remember that none of this is our fault.'

'Then why are they doing this?' said Vesper, her face puffy with tears. 'Why did they take my sister? They're hurting her now, I can feel it.'

'I don't know,' said Vivyen, slipping the book from her dress. 'There's a story in here about an evil mirror that gets broken into tiny fragments, and when someone gets a bit of its glass in their eye or their heart they can only see bad things and feel bad things.'

'Do you think these men have glass in their hearts and eyes?'

Vivyen felt tears prick her eyes.

'I think they must have.'

Lalique chewed her bottom lip and said, 'Any stories in there about bad people getting what's coming to them?'

'It's not really that kind of book,' said Vivyen, turning its crumpled pages.

'What's that one?' asked Oskar. 'She looks pretty fierce.'

Vivyen looked down at the book, her eyes widening at the ink-etched woodcut picture. She read the name beneath the picture, and her brows furrowed in amazement. 'I haven't seen that one before, but it looks like–'

Before she could say any more, the cell door burst open and six figures robed in white entered. One for every child. Like the one who'd taken Challis, their skin was burned and their lips were stained purple.

Vesper and Ivalee shouted at them. Oskar put his arms around Uriah as Lalique stood up with her fists balled at her side. Vivyen cried out as the first man into the meat locker quickly hoisted Lalique onto his shoulders with the ease of a man used to hefting dead weight. A second man grabbed Oskar, who howled and punched like a dervish. A third dragged Uriah's wounded body as a woman with darting, bloodshot eyes took Ivalee's hand. The girl didn't make a sound as she was led away.

Vesper was lifted screaming onto a man's shoulders, while the one who had taken Challis advanced on Vivyen.

She backed into the corner of the room, holding her book across her chest. She'd been afraid of this man before, but not any more. She hated him, but her fear was gone, displaced by faith in someone she knew would risk anything to save her.

‘Going to try and hurt me, girl?’ he asked. Spittle gathered at the corners of his mouth and his eyes were veined with pink threads.

‘No,’ said Vivyen. ‘I’m not, but I know who will.’

‘Oh?’ said the man. ‘Who’s that?’

‘She will,’ said Vivyen, holding out her book and letting him see the picture of the woman and her enormous pistol with the white serpents curling around the barrel.

‘*Madame Ghost Snake*?’ said the man, reading the name.

‘My mama,’ said Vivyen.

This deep in the ship, the air had a thick, chemical texture, heavy with the scent of unwashed bodies, unclean oils and hot metal. Alivia gagged at the stench but Severian seemed unaffected.

The temperature had been dropping markedly for the last thirty minutes or so.

‘We’re close to ventral hull plating damaged in the void war over Molech,’ said Severian, as though plucking the surface thoughts from her mind. He was a latent, so perhaps he was.

‘A good place to hide,’ said Alivia.

‘Not good enough,’ said Severian.

‘We’re close?’

‘Better than close,’ said Severian, putting a finger to his lips. ‘We’re here.’

He pushed her back against the wall, into an alcove she hadn’t even seen was there, and stood in front of her. Two men approached through the shadows, each with the perforated steel barrel of a stubber held loosely across his chest.

Crude, grubby, solid-slug weapons, but simple and noisy.

As much a means of warning as a weapon. Like the man Severian had killed earlier, their lips were stained purple, and Alivia caught the astringent reek of potent narcotics.

The men drew level. One turned towards the Luna Wolf, looking straight at him, but somehow not seeing him.

‘Right here,’ whispered Severian.

The man’s mouth dropped open in shock.

Severian’s blade pistoned through it. He twisted the blade up and churned his victim’s brain to gruel. With this man hooked like a fish, he stepped from the shadows and wrapped his fingers around the other man’s neck.

A crushing squeeze and a crunch of bone. Head and body parted company. The second man dropped in a gushing heap as Severian used the embedded blade to lift his first kill from the corridor, letting it drop out of sight.

‘Hide that one,’ said Severian, nodding towards the parts of the second man he’d killed.

‘Seriously?’ said Alivia. ‘There’s blood everywhere. I don’t think it much matters whether we hide him or not.’

Severian looked up from cleaning his blade on the dead man’s robes. Arcing blood spray painted the walls of the corridor and dripped from the curved ceiling.

‘Force of habit not to leave easily discovered corpses in my wake,’ he said, standing and sheathing his blade. ‘It won’t matter in a few minutes anyway.’

‘How could he not see you?’ asked Alivia, following Severian along the corridor’s numerous twists and turns. Near the end of their journey, his dead man’s map was growing more precise.

‘Severian?’ she said. ‘How could he not see you?’

He shrugged, and she sensed his unwillingness to elaborate.

‘It’s a talent I have,’ he said, pausing at the foot of an access stairwell partially blocked with debris and twisted steelwork. ‘Probably the only reason Malcador was able to keep Dorn from having me killed.’

‘Dorn? *Rogal* Dorn?

‘Do you know anyone else named Dorn?’

‘No.’

‘There you go then,’ said Severian, climbing the stairwell with preternatural agility. Warm mist spilled from above, moist and laden with a strange perfume that made Alivia want to gag. Like syrup and honey, but over-sweetened to the point of sickly.

Severian was three times her bulk, yet climbed the web of rebars and broken glass with an ease that utterly eluded Alivia. His oblique answers simply spawned a hundred more questions, but this wasn’t the time to ask them. Instead, she followed the Luna Wolf, trying to step where he stepped, move how he moved. She lifted a hooked length of rebar, testing its weight as a club. Light enough to swing, heavy enough to kill anything she hit.

The stairwell brought them out onto a wide mezzanine walkway filled with broken packing crates and flapping sheets of cloth. From the scale of structural steel overhead, this was clearly a chamber of some size. Hissing pipework threaded giant girders overhead, interleaving like jungle creepers. Warm rain drizzled from every surface, and Alivia spat a mouthful of brackish, iron-flavoured water.

Moisture-sheened columns soared like towering tree trunks, bracing walls that angled inwards to form the underside of a stepped dome. Alivia was no shipwright and had no idea what purpose such a space might serve.

‘It’s a vent chamber for the plasma coolant system,’ said Severian.

‘Stop doing that,’ snapped Alivia.

‘Doing what?’

‘Lifting thoughts from my mind.’

‘It’s hard not to,’ he said.

Alivia took a breath of warm, metallic air, trying to calm herself. Her fear for Vivyen was flaring from her like a beacon. No wonder Severian was hearing her thoughts.

Panels of corrugated sheet metal lashed to the mezzanine railings kept the chamber below from sight. Sibilant voices drifted on the air, a seductive mantra that concealed a corruption offering one of the easiest route to damnation.

‘You were right,’ she whispered. ‘It’s the warp.’

They crawled towards the railings, and Alivia pressed her face to the plates of warm, wet steel. Through a gap in the corrugated metal, she saw a chamber that more than justified the first word that leapt to mind.

Temple.

Several hundred people filled the space below, some in white robes, some naked. Fires burned in wide bowls held aloft on chains and the smoke made serpentine patterns in the air. A raised area opposite the mezzanine had been cleared, and a hexagonal platform of metallic crates that looked too much like an altar for Alivia’s liking was set at its centre.

She swept the crowd, looking for any sign of Vivyen.

‘Do you see her?’ asked Severian.

She shook her head. ‘I don’t know if that’s good or not.’

‘Only one way to find out.’

‘Go down there?’

He nodded.

‘There’s hundreds of people down there,’ said Alivia.

‘Nothing I can’t handle.’

‘What about them?’ said Alivia, pointing to the cybernetics lurking at the edge of the chamber. As tall as Severian, each was armed with serious firepower and plated in bonded steel.

‘Thallaxii,’ said Severian. ‘Why did it have to be Thallaxii?’

Alivia switched her gaze from the chanting supplicants and cybernetic killers as she saw movement at the end of the chamber. Alivia’s breath caught in her throat and she stifled a cry as she saw six figures in white emerge from the darkness, each one bearing a struggling child.

‘Vivyen,’ she said.

‘Which one?’

‘The girl at the back.’

‘One of them’s hurt,’ said Severian.

A boy, no more than fourteen, with a soaking bandage tied around his shoulder. Alivia wished she had more bullets. Every man and woman in this chamber deserved to die for what they were doing here.

The children were crying as their captors lifted them onto the crates and secured them with chains around the neck. Vivyen wasn’t struggling, and Alivia saw defiance in her posture, a strength she hadn’t even begun to suspect the girl of possessing.

‘What the hell is that?’ asked Severian, narrowing his eyes as something suspended on a hideous arrangement of wires and chains jerked through the air.

‘Throne!’ hissed the Luna Wolf as the skeletal figure emerged into the light to rapturous awe. Like a famine victim experimented upon by a madman, the naked body twitched like the marionette of a palsied puppet-master. Its suspended body was emaciated and ravaged by toxins, the skull an almost fleshless dome. Unseeing eyes were cataract-blind and its stretched, too-wide grin of a mouth was smeared purple like some nightmarish theatrical clown.

The children screamed at the sight of it, pulling frantically at the chains binding them to the altar.

Despite the atrophied ruin of the figure’s form, it was clearly a man, and Alivia’s flesh crawled at the sight of the writhing womb-sac extending from his abdomen. A translucent flesh-pouch that squirmed with some unborn abomination. It detached itself from its skeletal host and landed in the centre of the altar to horrified screams from the children.

Alivia tightened her grip on her gun and rebar club.

Severian’s fingers flexed on the hilt of his empowered gladius as he picked up on her fear. He turned to look her straight in the eye.

‘Don’t say it,’ she said. ‘Don’t you dare say it.’

‘If this is what you think it is,’ he said, making no apology for lifting the thought from her. ‘We can’t let it happen.’

‘I know,’ said Alivia with a strangled sob. ‘But…’

‘But nothing. If we can’t save her, we kill her. *We* do it, not them.’

Alivia met Severian’s gaze and the ice in his eyes was the mirror of her own.

‘We’re going down there to rescue those children,’ said Alivia. ‘And if you so much as harm one hair on my daughter’s head, I’ll kill you.’

‘She’s not your child,’ said Severian. ‘She never was.’

‘Yes she is,’ said Alivia. ‘They all are. Don’t you understand? They’re *all* my children.’

Vivyen’s anger had kept the worst of her fear at bay, but the sight of the monster above destroyed the last shreds of her bravery. The skin-bag had dropped, squirmed and heaved at the centre of the stacked crates, a squalling animal in a dripping caul.

Ivalee shrieked and pulled at her chain, bloodying her neck against the chain's rough edges. Oskar knelt over Uriah, his hands clasped before him and repeating the same phrase over and over: 'The Emperor protects! The Emperor protects!'

Lalique lay curled in a weeping ball. Vesper simply stared at the heaving, screeching thing with a look of resignation.

It twitched and jumped and spasmed, eager to rip its way into the world. The hanging corpse of flesh looked down at them with dead white eyes and a leering, purple-smeared mouth.

A pair of needle-like fangs pierced the caul, tearing down.

'Please, mama!' cried Vivyen. 'Please help us!'

Finally the sac split open as the thing inside cut its way out. And in a gush of bloody amniotic fluids its squirming contents disgorged into their midst.

Severian's first shots blasted the head from one of the Thallaxii. Two shells, right through the joint of neck and head. A three-round burst through the hip joint of another and put a second on the ground.

Alivia hadn't trust enough in her skill with the serpenta to risk wasting a bullet from this range. She vaulted over the railings and dropped into the suddenly panicked crowd of onlookers.

She landed hard and rolled, hitting legs and bringing bodies down on top of her. She kicked and elbowed her way to her feet, hammering the metalled length of her serpent-etched pistol into unprotected faces and the rebar into the soft bone above the ear.

Alivia heard the thundering, flat bangs of Severian's bolt pistol. The impact of mass-reactives on armour. Screeching binaric voices and the whipcrack flashes of lightning guns.

She had no attention to spare for Severian.

Robed lunatics came at her, but she didn't waste her bullets on them. She swung the length of rebar she'd taken from the stairwell, pulping skulls and splintering arms and legs with every swing.

She left a trail of howling bodies behind her. With her gun extended in front of her and the rebar held high at her shoulder, people fought to get out of her way instead of trying to stop her.

She saw the altar and the bloody, new-birthed mess upon it.

'Throne, no…' she said.

Severian had no qualms about using human shields. These people had forfeited their right to live by being part of this, so whether they died by his hands or the forking blasts of lighting from the Thallaxii was utterly irrelevant.

He waded through the crowd, slaughtering anyone stupid enough not to get out of his way. Some men attacked him, as if they believed they could actually hurt him. He was doing the universe a favour by killing them before their stupidity got anyone else killed.

Proximo Tarchon's glitter-sheened gladius had an edge like a photonic weapon, keener than that honed by any living armourer he'd met.

Too bad he'd have to give it back.

Severian's claim that the hundreds of people were no threat to him wasn't a boast. Encased in powered battleplate and wrought by the Emperor's gene-wrights to be an apex killer, it was simply a fact.

Blood slicked him to the waist.

He lost count of how many he'd killed. Dozens. Scores probably. Not enough.

He scooped up three men and hurled them at the nearest Thallax. They broke against its sheet-steel armour, but he'd expected nothing else. A crack of lightning scorched their bodies to ash and flame.

Severian dropped and skidded low, slamming into the cybernetic. An armoured transhuman was more than enough to put it on its back. The machine-flesh hybrid crashed to the ground, but a Thallax wasn't a

robot, or a sluggish series of commands and doctrina wafers. It had a living mind at its heart, living reflexes bound to its fibre-bundle muscles.

It rolled swiftly onto one knee, bringing its weapon to bear. Severian hacked the gladius through the crackling breech and jammed his pistol between the interlocked rings of its gorget.

Three shots exploded within its armoured carapace in quick succession. The scrap of life within died a moment later. He swung himself around its body as a blitzing storm of jade light exploded where he'd been standing.

The Thallax toppled onto its side and Severian instantly saw the three remaining cybernetics.

Closing in. Too far apart to engage together.

'You are smarter than you look,' said Severian.

The Thallaxii bludgeoned through the panicked crowd, and those too slow to get out of their way were crushed underfoot.

'But not smart enough.'

The three grenades he'd planted in his wake exploded.

Vivyen screamed as the coiled, slippery mess erupted in their midst. Red with blood and sticky mucus, it hissed and thrashed with the pain of its birth. A rugose snake with iridescent scales and an elongated skull that was a vile blend of vulpine and reptilian anatomy.

Its head split wide in four wedged segments, each filled with long, crooked fangs that glistened with venom. Its eyes were weeping sores, veined with red and yellow.

Vivyen and the others scrambled away from it as far as their fetters would allow. They screamed and pulled at their chains, scraping their palms raw on the metal. The serpent's head flashed down and fastened on Uriah's wounded shoulder. Leathery glands at its neck swelled and the half-dead boy convulsed as venoms pumped into his flesh. Purple stains spread like ink in water across his skin, and frothed matter erupted from his mouth in a torrent of stinking bile. Whipping around, the serpent's fangs snapped shut on Oskar's leg and the child howled in agony as its bite poisoned him.

A series of deafening bangs sounded and people screamed.

The serpent ignored the commotion and released Oskar, turning its quartered skull towards Vesper. It lunged forwards and bit down twice, once on her arm and once on her neck.

Lalique died next, trying to shield Ivalee from the monster's attack. She howled as the venoms took her, and the serpent beast descended upon Ivalee.

Vivyen closed her eyes, but heard the girl's pitiful shrieks of pain over the screams coming from the crowd...

Vivyen's eyes snapped open.

Those were screams as terrified as her own.

People were running and crackling bolts of lightning exploded throughout the chamber, arcing from its giant columns and girders. She caught a glimpse of a grey giant in scorched armour as he threw himself at a tall robot with only one arm. She lost sight of him as the lethal serpent reared up in front of her, its bloody gullet open wide.

'Please, no!' she cried as it whipped forward.

A hand flashed out and caught the serpent around its neck, its fangs snapping shut a hair's breadth away.

Furious, it twisted and bit Vivyen's saviour's forearm.

Alivia slammed its head down on the packing crate altar.

The monster thrashed, its tail lashing like a bullwhip.

Alivia jammed the barrel of the Ferlach serpenta against its pinned skull and pulled the trigger.

Its head exploded in a welter of blood and bone.

'You don't get to hurt my daughter,' she said.

The pain was incredible, like nothing Alivia had felt in all her long life. It coursed around her body like a white-hot electric charge, burning as it went. Her inhuman metabolism, numinous and all but immortal, fought the serpent's kiss, a venom born in cosmic fire.

The sounds of screaming and gunfire faded out.

Her vision greyed and the muscles in her legs spasmed as her synapses fired crazily. She held onto the crates, purpled bile retching up from her gut.

'Mama!' cried a voice next to her.

She looked up, but could only see a blurred shadow. She knew the voice, but couldn't place it.

'Rebekah? Is that you?' she gasped, her throat feeling like it was closing up. 'Milcah?'

'It's me, mama. It's Vivyen.'

Alivia nodded and a gush of purple-black vomit erupted from her. Her chest heaved like a bellows-press and yet more nightmarish venom was expelled, a squirting flood that spilled over the crates.

Alivia blinked tears from her eyes as she heard sickening cracks and the wet meat sound of flesh detaching from bone. She heaved a breath, one rancid with necrosis and raw newness. She was weaker than she could ever remember, barely able to keep a grip on the serpenta.

Alivia wrapped an arm around Vivyen, her poisoned flesh a bloated mottled mass of purple and yellow. She kept her daughter pulled tight to her breast, keeping her back to the horror unfolding upon the altar.

The envenomed children were changing.

Remade by an invisible sculptor.

Transforming.

Swollen with immaterial toxins, their bodies split and cracked, jerking with unnatural vigour to an unseen design. The empyrean imparted renewed ambition to their flesh, meat running molten from the bone and melding in unholy union.

A second coming, an immaculate birth of nightmare.

It grew swiftly, sculpting the offering of dead flesh into a form both wondrous and repulsive; gracile limbs bearing supple flesh of ivory and mauve. Glossy and smooth, clawed and feline of eye, it was horned, yet beautiful. Its wet tongue promised heights of pleasure and undreamed torments in equal measure, a succubus nurtured in the womb of a dying race and fathered by forbidden desires.

A daemon.

And yet it was unfinished, a work in progress, its metamorphosis incomplete. It limped towards Alivia, one leg too slender, its remade flesh and bone only half-formed. It reached for her with chitinous claws of purpled ebon.

Alivia lifted the serpenta and pulled the trigger.

Her bullets tore through the newborn daemon, carving lambent furrows through its body. It shrieked, in pleasure and pain both. Phosphor-bright ichor spilled from its wounds, yet it kept coming, moving in stuttering, unfinished pain.

Its black eyes promised an ecstatic death.

'***Your flesh is promised***,' it said. '***Give it to me***.'

The serpenta's hammer snapped down on an empty chamber.

'You want it?' said Alivia. 'Take it. It's yours.'

Severian twisted the burning arm of the Thallax around its segmented plastron. Fire crackled along the weapon's length. The thing inside was fighting hard and even with only one arm, it wasn't giving up.

It rammed a shoulder into him and he went with the blow, dropping and rolling, pulling it with him. The Thallax toppled, and Severian wrenched its arm back. Metal buckled and tore. The arm came loose.

Severian rose to one knee and jammed the flaring end of the barrel into its helmet. A blazing plume of light engulfed its conical headpiece. It ran like heated wax, and boiling amniotic fluids gushed out in a stinking rush.

Beneath the cracked visor, a fleshless skull screamed.

Encased in a bronze headpiece of melting wires and invasive neural spikes drilled through the bone, the Thallax spasmed as its life finally ended.

Severian sprang away, revolted by the sight.

His threat awareness told him there was nothing left alive that could hurt him. The Thallax were down, as were the few mortals who'd been stupid enough to face him.

Severian turned to where Alivia had gone.

And saw he was wrong.

There *was* something that could still hurt him.

The daemon had claimed Alivia.

Its claws dug deep, and she felt its warp-stuff bleed into her, taking the final piece of what the living cadaver had promised it.

Their union was one of pain, but also one of promise.

The powers of those possessed were myriad, and the temptation to wield them burned hot in Alivia's breast. For all the cunning wrought into her kind's making, they were none of them above such bargains, nor above mortal ambition or physical desires.

They were, after all was said and done, still human.

But Alivia had become so much more than that.

She was a mother.

Alivia let the daemon in, let its essence consume her.

Then slammed the door behind it.

'No way out,' she said.

Severian walked slowly towards the makeshift altar, a blade in each hand. Alivia floated alongside the wretched architect of this slaughter, but where chains supported his paste-white form, Alivia needed nothing so prosaic to remain aloft.

Her outline wavered in the air, like identical picter negatives placed fractionally out of sync and trying to realign. Two beings struggling to occupy one body.

Like the corpse of Serghar Targost aboard the *Vengeful Spirit,* Alivia Sureka was now host to a warp beast.

But she was fighting it.

He saw pleading behind her eyes, a restlessness beneath her numinous skin that threatened to erupt at any moment.

'Get. Her. Away.'

The words were forced out from behind clenched teeth.

And in that instant, Severian understood the truth of what he was seeing. The battle within Alivia wasn't her fighting to hold on to her humanity.

It was the thing inside struggling to get out.

She saw his understanding and nodded.

Severian bent his back and made a quarter turn.

His right arm snapped forward and Proximo Tarchon's gladius spun through the air. It buried itself in Alivia's heart.

The young girl they'd come to save screamed, calling her name as if that might somehow bring her back.

Alivia fell to the altar as a body of dark smoke calved from her flesh. Its connection to the warp severed, the scraps of the daemon claimed the nearest living soul to bear its form.

But that rotten soul was singularly unable to host it.

Shargali-Shi's body bloated as the daemon dug deeper and ever deeper into him, trawling his flesh for the strength to match its need.

All it found was a hollow shell, empty and useless.

He felt its terror as reality prepared to expel it.

Shargali-Shi could only wail his despair as he convulsed on his chains, jerking like a thing made entirely from broken bones. The daemon's dying geometries were pulling him in a hundred directions at once.

His skin was drum-tight, stretched to the limits of its tolerance; his mouth became a distended void as cartilage tore and sinew snapped.

Then he broke, his body exploding as it released its captive, and his wasted fragments were incinerated by the empyreal fire his death had unleashed.

Alivia opened her eyes, staring up at a number of gently swinging chains hanging from the high domed ceiling. Motes of fading light clung to them, drifting slowly downwards like the embers of a dying fire.

She groaned in pain. Her chest hurt.

Her whole *body* hurt.

Vivyen's head was buried in the hollow of her collarbone and Alivia felt hot tears wetting her skin. Vivyen was alive.

And that made all the pain in the world worthwhile.

'Vivyen?' asked Alivia.

'Mama,' was Vivyen's only reply. 'I knew you'd come. The book told me, but I knew anyway.'

'The book?'

'Madame Ghost Snake,' said Vivyen.

'Who?'

'As good a name as any for someone who ought to be dead,' said Severian.

Alivia forced herself up onto one elbow.

The Luna Wolf sat on the edge of the crates, wiping her blood from the gladius he'd thrown. Alivia winced as she relived the pain of it shearing through her breastbone to her heart. She looked over her shoulder. Other than the three of them, the chamber was empty.

'That was a good throw,' she said.

'Why aren't you dead?' asked Severian. 'That serpent bit you and I *know* I split your heart.'

'I thought you said the world was more interesting with some secrets left in it,' said Alivia.

Severian grinned and offered her a hand up. 'True enough. Very well, Alivia Sureka, keep your secrets for now, but Malcador is going to want to hear them.'

Alivia took Severian's hand, not wishing to sour the moment with how little she cared for the Sigillite's wants. She levered herself into a sitting position. Her body had been traumatised on every level, physically, mentally and spiritually, abused beyond anything she'd imagined possible to survive.

Her hand slid over her chest, feeling the clean cut in the fabric where Severian's gladius had penetrated. There was a scar there, of course there was, but it was meaningless next to the scars on her psyche. She would wake screaming for years, perhaps forever, but she kept that horror at bay for now. Vivyen needed

her to be strong.

Nightmares could wait.

‘I told you that weapon had shed potent blood,’ she said.

‘So you did.’

Alivia swept her gaze around the chamber.

‘Are they all dead?’

‘They will be,’ promised Severian.

‘Then let’s go home, Vivyen,’ said Alivia.

AFTERWORD

Okay, I know what you're probably thinking – *War Without End* is a slightly glib title, when you consider that the Horus Heresy series has been blazing along for over ten years now. It's important to remember that before the first handful of novels were published, all we really had was a few thousand words of much-loved and oft-quoted background text from Warhammer 40,000 loremaster Alan Merrett. He covered the main battles, the broad strokes, the stuff you needed to know in order to make sense of the whole thing.

But that wasn't the full story. It was the beginning of something much bigger.

The Horus Heresy is the greatest war in the history of mankind, and every one of the Space Marine Legions has a role to play in it. While not all were active right from the start, after Isstvan V and the Dropsite Massacre the number of plot threads and story arcs exploded, spreading from the single nexus that began the seven years of the Age of Darkness. However, as with everything in this material universe of ours, that which has a beginning must also, logically, have an ending. We'll come to that shortly, at least in the context of this afterword...

The stories in this anthology cover a seemingly disparate and unconnected series of events, but if you look a little closer there are plenty of subtle links between them, and hints to what is coming next. I can, for example, confirm that the major villains and the unlikely hero of the next Horus Heresy novel have all appeared in the last few hundred pages.

And it's also no coincidence that we began *and* ended with the 'Serpent Gods' of Molech...

All of these tales were originally published either in the event-exclusives *The Imperial Truth* and *Sedition's Gate*, or the short collections *Death and Defiance* and *Blades of the Traitor*. However, one of the most obvious differences is the order in which they are presented here – somewhere between chronological and thematic, to highlight the crossovers and interconnectivity, and giving more context than perhaps they had before. 'Allegiance' followed by 'Daemonology', for example, gives two very different but direct continuations of the novel *Scars*. Similarly, the events of 'By the Lion's Command' run slightly ahead of the stories set in and around Imperium Secundus, while 'Black Oculus' slides almost enigmatically into the dreamlike space between *Angel Exterminatus* and the Battle of Tallarn.

I've spoken many times before about the reasons why these sorts of stories are so important to the Horus Heresy novel series, and why they're so rewarding for the authors to write, for us to edit and for everyone to read. Aside from all the shooty-death-kill-in-space you could ever want and more awesome characters than you can shake a fistful of dice at, it's about continuity. Well crafted, authentic feeling drama doesn't just spring fully formed from the pages of a sourcebook.

Also, a good portion of the editors' work is not only to spot what *should* go into a specific story, but also what shouldn't. Like a well timed cut-to-black in your favourite film or TV series, the blank spaces and the unknowns left by the prose are often as poignant and exciting as anything written on the page, and by the power of their omission we get a sense of a much larger universe that we can tease beforehand or revisit afterwards.

Why didn't the events of 'Sermon of Exodus' go into the beginning of *The Damnation of Pythos*? Because it wasn't strictly relevant to the Space Marine point of view, but it certainly adds a lot of flavour to the cults of Davin that feature so heavily in the final acts. Why didn't Horus corrupt Eristede Kell at the end of *Nemesis*? Because time had to pass for his absence to be felt, for the mystery to marinate in our collective subconscious and make the payoff that much more exciting.

Why didn't 'Howl of the Hearthworld' reach any kind of final conclusion? What happened to Vulkan's arsenal after 'Artefacts'? When was 'Hands of the Emperor' set? How long does Fabius have left, even with his 'Chirurgeon'?

Well, I don't want to spoil *all* the surprises for you.

One of the questions that people ask all the time is 'When will the Horus Heresy actually end?' – at one Black Library Live event, someone even asked me to state, on microphone, on the record, how many books there would be in total. I think I mumbled something about some in-universe dates on the timeline, before arriving at the rough conclusion that *Mark of Calth* was roughly halfway through the series.

In my regular chats with Forge World's Alan Bligh, we often pull out our bullet-point list of 'Things That Need to Happen Before Horus Gets to Terra', and it's a list that we will add to, whenever necessary. Both Black Library and Forge World are working hard to progress through the timeline: while we tell tales of mighty champions, infernal beasts and grim battles, they provide a lot more detail on the war and the armies that fought it. We are two sides of the same shiny lodge medal.

Having had more time to think about it, the practical answer to the question is that the Horus Heresy will end when every point on that list has been crossed off. The stories in this anthology covered about nine of them directly, and paved the way for many more.

But a more cryptic response is: *Be careful what you wish for*.

Is the end in sight? Of course it is. You know how all this turns out, and behind the curtain we now know *exactly* how many books there will be.

Are there going to be any more surprises along the way? Oh, you'd better believe it. The original aim of this series was to turn the popular misconception of the 'facts' on its head, and we have absolutely no intention of doing anything less.

Just you wait. The light of Imperium Secundus is fading, and night will soon fall.

And then things are going to get *ugly*.

Laurie Goulding
September 2015

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Annandale is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *The Damnation of Pythos*. He also writes the Yarrick series, consisting of the novella *Chains of Golgotha* and the novels *Imperial Creed* and *The Pyres of Armageddon*. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The Death of Antagonis* and *Overfiend*. He is a prolific writer of short fiction, including the novella *Mephiston: Lord of Death* and numerous short stories set in The Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000 universes. He has also written several short stories set in the Age of Sigmar. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Betrayer* and *The First Heretic*, as well as the novella *Aurelian* and the audio drama *Butcher's Nails*, for the same series. He also wrote the popular Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach*, the Abaddon novel *The Talon of Horus*, the Grey Knights novel *The Emperor's Gift* and numerous short stories. He lives and works in Northern Ireland.

John French has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, the novel *Tallarn: Ironclad*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile, Ahriman: Sorcerer* and *Ahriman: Unchanged*, plus a number of related short stories collected in *Ahriman: Exodus*, including 'The Dead Oracle' and 'Hand of Dust'. Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella *Fateweaver*, plus many short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

Guy Haley is the author of the Space Marine Battles novel *Death of Integrity*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Valedor* and *Baneblade*, and the novellas *The Eternal Crusader, The Last Days of Ector* and *Broken Sword*, for *Damocles*. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *Warstorm, Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon.* He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Deathfire* and *Vulkan Lives*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio drama *Censure*. His novella *Feat of Iron* was a New York Times bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnos*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Time of Legends novel *The Great Betrayal*. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

Graham McNeill has written more Horus Heresy novels than any other Black Library author! His canon of work includes *Vengeful Spirit* and his New York Times bestsellers *A Thousand Sons* and the novella *The Reflection Crack'd*, which featured in *The Primarchs* anthology. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now six novels long, and has close links to

his Iron Warriors stories, the novel *Storm of Iron* being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written a Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus. For Warhammer, he has written the Time of Legends trilogy The Legend of Sigmar, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award.

Rob Sanders is the author of 'The Serpent Beneath', a novella that appeared in the *New York Times* bestselling Horus Heresy anthology *The Primarchs*. His other Black Library credits include the Warhammer 40,000 titles *Adeptus Mechanicus: Skitarius* and *Tech-Priest, Legion of the Damned, Atlas Infernal* and *Redemption Corps* and the audio drama *The Path Forsaken*. He has also written the Warhammer Archaon duology, *Everchosen* and *Lord of Chaos* along with many Quick Reads for the Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in the city of Lincoln, UK.

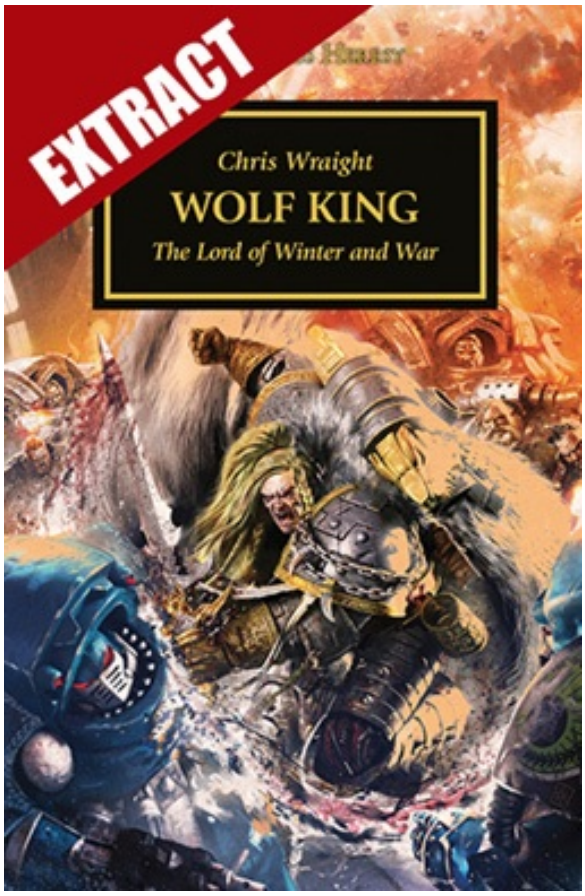
Andy Smillie is best known for his visceral Flesh Tearers novellas, *Sons of Wrath* and *Flesh of Cretacia*, and the novel *Trial by Blood*. He has also written a host of short stories starring this brutal Chapter of Space Marines and a number of audio dramas including *The Kauyon, Blood in the Machine, Deathwolf* and *From the Blood*.

James Swallow is best known for being the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Fear to Tread* and *Nemesis*, which both reached the New York Times bestseller lists, *The Flight of the Eisenstein* and a series of audio dramas featuring the character Nathaniel Garro. For Warhammer 40,000, he is best known for his four Blood Angels novels, the audio drama *Heart of Rage*, and his two Sisters of Battle novels. His short fiction has appeared in *Legends of the Space Marines* and *Tales of Heresy*.

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Deliverance Lost*, as well as the novellas *Corax: Soulforge, Ravenlord* and *The Lion*, which formed part of the *New York Times* bestselling collection *The Primarchs*. He is particularly well-known for his Dark Angels stories, including the Legacy of Caliban series. His Warhammer 40,000 repertoire further includes the Path of the Eldar series, the Horus Heresy audio dramas *Raven's Flight, Honour to the Dead* and *Raptor*, and a multiplicity of short stories. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*, and much more besides. He lives and works in Nottingham.

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Scars*, the novella *Brotherhood of the Storm* and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *Battle of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

An extract from *Wolf King*.



Three standard days previously, inside the Alaxxes Nebula – called the blood-well, the eye of acid – the Wolves had met in war council.

The Legion had been driven into the cluster by extremity, and only its extraordinary stellar violence had kept them alive to fight on. The gas cloud was vast, a skein of rust-red on the face of the void, falling into deeper and more intensive virulence the further one went in. Sensors were blinded, engine systems crippled and the Geller fields fizzed like magnesium on water. No sane Navigator would have taken a ship into those depths, save but for the certain promise of annihilation on the outside.

There were tunnels within, mere pockets of clear space between the great blooms of corrosive matter. The ships of the fleet could slip down them, guarded and menaced by the lethal shoals on every flank, hidden from enemy scan-sweeps and torpedo-rakes but open to devastating flares that punched through armour-plate and overloaded void shields. As they pushed into the bowels of the blood-well, the Wolves found that the capillaries grew narrower, more fouled, less open, tangled like nerve fronds. A ship dragged into the burning gas fields would be consumed in hours, its hull melting as its shield-carapace imploded and its warp core breached; so the Wolves ran warily, sending escorts out wide and running repeated augur-soundings.

No starlight illuminated those depths, and space itself glowed with the red anger of a clotted wound. The ice-grey prows of the *Vlka Fenryka* ships were as bloody as wolf maws. Every warship carried scars from the brutal battle with the Alpha Legion out in the open void. They had been ambushed while still recovering from post-Prospero operations; outnumbered and outmanoeuvred, and only retreating into the heart of the cloud had kept them alive to fight again. Many of their ships were now incapable of making for the warp even if the gas tides had allowed. Tech-crews crawled over every surface of every battleship, working punishing rotations just to get shield generators functioning and macrocannon arrays back online, but they would never complete that task adequately, not without the attentions of Mechanicum-sanctioned shipyards, and the closest of those was unimaginably far away.

So the Wolves were cornered, wounded and lean with hunger, forced into retreat by an enemy with greater resources and infinite patience. They were harried at every turn, driven onward like cattle before the whip, until the madness of confinement ran like a virus through the decks.

That was the environment in which Gunnar Gunnhilt, the Jarl of Onn, called Lord Gunn by his brothers and second only to the primarch, made his case.

‘They will run us down,’ he said.

The Legion command, a council of forty souls, listened intently. Russ himself had not spoken. The primarch was slouched in a granite throne, his true-wolves curled at his boots, his ruddy face locked in brooding. Frost-blue eyes glittered dully under a mane of dirty blond hair. The Lord of Winter and War had not fought since the abortive attempt to summon Alpharius to the *Hrafnkel*, and the enforced lethargy seemed to have atrophied him.

Bjorn had witnessed that last fight, had seen his primarch take apart a Contemptor Dreadnought as if it were a child's toy. That power must still have been there, coiled deep, locked in his brawler's hearts even in the midst of endless defeat, but the surface fire had gone. Russ now surrounded himself with runes, listening to the cold whispers of white-haired priests and trying to divine the auguries like a *gothi* of old.

It was whispered, and Bjorn had heard the whispers, that the Wolf King had lost his stomach for the fight; they said that being kept out of the greater war had turned his mind, that the death of Magnus haunted him and that he had not slept a clear night since the Khan had refused to come to his aid. Bjorn did not believe that and knew the whispers were foolish, but something, it had to be admitted, had changed. Lord Gunn knew it, Helmschrot knew it, as did the priests and the ship commanders and the jarls of the Legion.

'They believe us beaten,' Gunn said. 'That makes them unwary. We strike back hard, the fleet together, launching boarding actions to take out the lead battleships.' There were grunts of agreement around the ceremonial circle, lit only by the swaying light of half-cold fires. Above them all, looming in the dark, were totems from the origin-world – animal skulls, knot-handled axes, wide-eyed masks of gods and monsters – still bearing the marks of long-gone Fenrisian wind and rain. 'If we keep running, we will deserve to die here, skinny as starving dogs.'

Russ said nothing, but his fingers moved through the thick fur of the wolves at his feet. He stared into the heart of the circle at the annulus-stone, brought from Asaheim like all the other sarsens in that massive ship. Circles had been carved on its surface, concentric and spiralling, worn smooth by aeons, predating the Great Crusade by a thousand years.

'Gunn speaks true,' said Ogvai, adding to the counsel he had given before. All the jarls were united in this – they were tired of running.

Russ looked up then, but not at Lord Gunn or Ogvai Helmschrot or any of the others. He looked, as he so often did, straight at Bjorn. As he did so, Bjorn sensed the spark of resentment from the elder warriors, even Ogvai, the master of his own Great Company, and he felt the old mix of shame and pride that Russ's attention gave him.

No one knew why the primarch favoured him so much. For some, it was further evidence of the softening of his once-peerless battle-cunning. The rune-rattlers and bone-carvers kept their own counsel, and Bjorn himself had never wanted to know the reasons, not least for fear of what Russ might have seen.

In the event, the primarch said nothing to him. His gaze wandered away again, and one of the two wolves at his feet whined uneasily.

'This will be your fight, Gunn,' Russ said at last. 'Hit them hard, or not at all – they have the numbers on us.'

Lord Gunn did not grin at that, not like he might have done in the past. 'It will be done.'

'You have two hours, once we start,' said Russ, distractedly. 'No more. We break out in that time, or I'm calling you back.'

'Two hours–' started Gunn.

'No more,' snarled Russ, his eyes briefly flashing. 'They outnumber us, they outgun us. We break the cordon and push free of it, or we fall back. I will not have my fleet crippled on their anvil.'

He slumped back into torpor. He had not said whether he would try to hunt down Alpharius again, or leave the bladework to his warriors. He said so little.

Slowly, Lord Gunn bowed his head. He had been given his chance, but the margin for success was slender.

'As you will it,' was all he said, his fists balled on the stone before him as if he wanted to break it open.

They tracked the Alpha Legion on long-range augurs for the next two standard days, gaining as complete a picture of the enemy formation as they could. Lord Gunn's war council estimated that two-thirds of Alpharius's fleet had followed them into the gas cloud's heart, arranged in as loose a formation as the treacherous ingress-routes would allow. The rest had remained further back, hanging above the entire sprawling structure to ward against the Space Wolves escaping.

Precise numbers were hard to gauge, even across the Wolves' own ravaged fleet. Comms malfunctions led to many smaller ships being misclassified as lost when they were still within sensor range. What was clear was that the Alpha Legion resources were far in excess of what Gunn had at his disposal, and their capital ships were in better shape too. *Hrafnkel*, the fleet's lone Gloriana-class behemoth, had taken a beating during the escape into the nebula and would only offer ranged support to the break-out attempt. That left the line battleships *Ragnarok*, *Nidhoggur*, *Fenrysavar* and *Russvangum* to carry the main assault, even though the *Fenrysavar* was in only marginally better battle condition than the flagship.

The Alaxxes gulf presented tactical challenges: there was no space to spread out into the void, or to make elaborate manoeuvres. They would be fighting in the largest of the gas tunnels, hemmed in on all sides by the shifting curtains of foaming crimson. The aperture's diameter at the narrowest point was less than two hundred kilometres – a claustrophobic space to be marshalling a battlegroup in, and one that gave almost no room for proper movement.

Given those constraints, Lord Gunn had opted for the one thing his Legion could always be relied upon to excel at: full-frontal assault, conducted at speed and with full commitment. The core attack from the capital ships would be supported by two wings of strike cruisers, each one aiming to power ahead on either flank to hem in the lead Alpha Legion vessels and keep their lateral gun-hulls busy. As soon as battle was joined, Gunn would give the order for massed boarding torpedoes and gunship assaults. The earlier encounter in the deep void had driven home the lesson that the Wolves' only real advantage lay in hand-to-hand combat, despite the self-evident risks of losing warriors to a more numerous enemy. Lord Gunn's aim was, so he told his brothers, to 'ram our blades into their throats, twisting them so deep their eyes will burst'.

No one disagreed. The councils were concluded, swords were sharpened, armour was sanctified with runic wards and battle-rites were completed. Being hunted didn't suit the Wolves, and the chance to turn the tables sat well with the Legion's bruised soul.

Late on the second day, as the chronometer had it, the fleet was put on high alert. The trajectories had already been calculated, responding to expected Alpha Legion movements. The pursuing fleet was allowed to close in through a gradual slowing of the main plasma thrusters, made to look consistent with steadily leaking containment shells.

Throughout all of this, Russ remained only part-engaged. He spent increasing amounts of time in his own private chambers. Petitions went unanswered. Soon it became apparent that he'd meant what he'd said: this was Lord Gunn's attack.

As the fleet chronometer clicked into the nominal nocturnal phase, trigger-signals were distributed throughout the Wolves' rearguard, alerting them to the imminent movement of the battleship-core. The trailing escort vessel *Vrek* reported augmented real-view sightings of Alpha Legion outriders at a range of nine hundred kilometres, and those readings were fed into the prepared attack-pattern cogitators.

Six minutes later, the order for full-about was given and the bulk of the rearguard executed a lazy turn. The slowness of the manoeuvre served two purposes: to allow time for the lumbering battleships to bring their forward lances to bear, and to delay alerting the enemy that a major reconfiguration was underway until the last moment.

Nine minutes after that, attack vectors were transmitted to all line vessels – battleships, cruisers,

frigates, destroyers. Boarding parties were given their target-locations and sealed in launch tubes. As if in anticipation of what was to come, the gas clouds on all sides throbbed violently, sending arcs of glowing matter lashing across the face of the cloying depths.

Two minutes later, the lead Alpha Legion vessels entered true visual range. They were already formed up into defensive positions, spaced evenly across the width of the gas tunnel to prevent a sortie slipping through. The closest signals were those of strafe-attack destroyers, all now bearing the scaled sapphire livery of the XX Legion. Behind those came the bigger vessels, the real targets: Dominus and Vengeance-class warships bearing the hydra mark upon their axe-blade prows.

Lord Gunn, standing fully armoured on *Ragnarok*'s throne dais, took in the final assessments of the enemy formations. His amber eyes glittered under grey-black brows, scrutinising the void as if he would twist it apart with his fingers. On the ranked levels below, warriors of the Rout looked up at him, waiting. They all knew that the last time they had attempted to engage the Alpha Legion head-on they had danced with destruction, and now every expression was tight with the need for vengeance, to prove themselves, to do *better*.

We are the Wolves of Fenris, thought Gunn, drawing strength from their devotion. *We are the executioners, the savage guardians.*

He gripped the iron rails, leaning out over *Ragnarok*'s cavernous bridge-chamber.

'Begin,' he ordered.

And with a void-silent glare of superheated promethium, the massed ranks of the Rout's battlefleet lit engines, activated weapon banks and powered up to attack speed.

First, flanking wings of strike cruisers leapt down the edges of the tunnel, overburning their engines in an attempt to hit faster than the Alpha Legion could respond. *Ragnarok* took the central dominant position, covered on all sides by four wings of escorts. *Nidhoggur* and *Fenrysavar* formed up in a loose triangle position on the battle-plane, angling to widen the leading fire-aperture to its widest point.

The gap between the fleets closed. The Alpha Legion formations remained static, each vessel locked tightly to the next by the range of their main macrocannon batteries. They made no attempt to match the Wolves' attack speed, but kept up a steady velocity, holding together in the classic lattice formation.

In void war, structure was everything. In the open void, a fleet's defence hung entirely on its overlapping formation. Every warship of the Legiones Astartes was ferociously, almost comically, over-armed – built to subdue the galactic empires of xenos, each was the equal of an entire world's sub-warp defences, capable of dishing out phenomenal rounds of atmosphere-shredding punishment from long range. Putting such vessels into geometric patterns in which every single ship guarded the flanks of another produced an exponential multiplier effect, and thus Crusade war-fleets slid through the void like glittering predator packs, giving an enemy no unwatched facets and no open sectors. To break a settled Imperial fleet formation was a daunting task, and every shipmaster in every battlegroup knew the importance of maintaining the armour of numbers.

But this was not the open void. The Alaxxes tunnels prevented the most flamboyant outflanking figures, and so what was left was a test of speed and close-range manoeuvring, something that the VI believed gave them the advantage. Though they couldn't match the XX Legion's patient accumulation of territorial advantage, they could outdo them in daring.

So the Space Wolves outriders hurtled into contact with a kind of feral abandon, rolling away from incoming flak-battery fire, their lances burning like stars. The Alpha Legion vanguard fell back, maintaining their interlocked position, soaking up the first assaults.

It took only seconds for the capital ships to engage. Making use of the narrow channels cleared by the

strike cruisers' runs, *Ragnarok* launched a massed salvo of torpedoes, backed up by lance-fire from its escorts and tightly packed broadsides from its own macrocannons.

That hurt the Alpha Legion ships. The volume of impacts, launched all at once, smashed frontal void-coverage and sheered adamantium buttresses. Gunn had ordered every commander to run primary weapons grids at overcapacity, running the risk of system overload but giving a savage punch to the opening exchanges. Two hurtling Wolves destroyers were lost in catastrophic explosions as their power-containment systems failed, but the resulting maelstrom compensated for their loss – half a dozen Alpha Legion ships were crippled or destroyed in the blaze, including a Dominus-class monster with the ident *Gamma Mu*.

That, though, was not the primary purpose of the attack. Hangar doors on every warship hissed open, bleeding oxygen into the void in plumes. Waves of boarding torpedoes burst from the delivery tubes, clustering and twisting before locking on to strike coordinates. Secondary wings of gunships launched while the mother ships were still at attack speed, shooting off on pre-planned assault vectors as the lateral batteries opened up behind them.

Lord Gunn had made his move, committing the fleet to close-range assault, and it lit the gas tunnel walls with sunbursts of thruster backwash. Powering towards the hulking monsters ahead, the salvoes of tiny assault craft screamed towards their targets, taking the slender hopes of their Legion with them.

Bjorn's pack launched from the fast-attack frigate *Icebitten* during the first few seconds of the assault. The boarding torpedo tore into the battlesphere alongside the others, wheeling and diving through exploding plasma bursts as the cogitators ran the trillions of calculations needed to deliver them to their target.

Locked down in his restraint harness, Bjorn saw the incoming ship-ident flash up on his helm display a split second before they hit it: *Iota Malephelos*. It didn't mean anything to him then; it was just another one of the swarm of escort craft that the boarding parties were aiming to take down, freeing the capital ships to open up with their main gun-lines.

With a sickening *crack*, the torpedo crashed into the vessel's hull, and Bjorn's world dissolved into a juddering chaos of white noise and follow-up impacts. The torpedo's prow smashed deep through layers of armoured decking, screeching like a banshee before grinding to a halt amid molten tangles of burning steel.

Meltas fired, clamps blew and the bow doors slammed open. The thunder of driver-engines, amplified by the close-pressed walls, gave way to the howl of escaping atmosphere. Bjorn ripped his restraints free, unhooked his bolter and charged out of the flaming aperture. His pack – Hvan, Ferith, Angvar, Eunwald, Urth and Godsmote – fell in close behind, their helm lenses shimmering crimson in the whirl of lambent shadows.

Bjorn no longer carried *Blódbringer*, the power axe he'd borne during the previous action, but now wielded a master-crafted lightning claw at the end of his left arm and bolter in his right gauntlet. The fighting was heavy, first against well-armed ship menials, then against the real targets: Alpha Legionnaires. The traitors emerged from the flickering shadows, their scale-pattern armour dark under failing lumen-strips. The pack wiped out the three of them, overwhelming in both numbers and speed. They stayed tight after that, sweeping down narrow feeder-corridors with the blood still hot on their blades.

More mortals were slain as the pack zeroed in on the objective, all members acting in concert, driven to a greater pitch of savagery by the burning need for vengeance.

The sternest test came just before the command bridge – an Alpha Legion champion in Terminator plate, backed up by a dozen more Space Marines and mortal auxiliaries, blocking further access amid the criss-

cross ironwork of barricades. The legionnaire came straight towards them, chainblades revving under blazing combi-bolters. Hvan was blasted out of contention and thrown against the deck in a hail of shells. Godsmote ducked down below the volleys; his chainsword lashed out to bite, but was kicked away and crunched into a bulkhead. Urth and Eunwald slammed themselves back against the corridor's walls, launching ranged fire at the enemy.

The champion never spoke. There were no vox-amplified roars of aggression, just silent, efficient murder-dealing. Ferith was downed next, unable to evade the sweeping paths of bolts, his armour shattered into a network of blood-edged cracks. Angvar charged, and was crushed against the far wall with a mighty swipe of the Terminator's right arm.

Roaring death-curses from the Old Ice, Bjorn leapt out at the enemy. His four adamantium talons snarled into energy-shrouded life, harsh blue against the gloom around him.

The champion came at him hard, chainblades juddering in a bloody shriek. The two warriors crashed together, and Bjorn felt the raking pain of adamantium teeth cutting into his pauldron. He took a bolt-round close to the chest, nearly hurling him onto his back. He veered, swerved and thrust, twisting to keep his foe close.

He thrust his claw upward, catching the legionary beneath the helm. Lesser talons would have cracked and splayed, breaking on the reinforced gorget-collar and opening Bjorn up to the killing blow.

But these talons bit true. Their disruptor shroud blazed in a riot of blue-white, tearing into the thick ceramite. The claws pushed deeper, slicking through flesh and carving up sinew, muscle and bone. Hot blood fountained along the adamantium claw-lengths, fizzing as it boiled away on the edges.

The champion staggered, pinned at the neck. Bjorn twisted the blades and the enemy fell, his throat torn out, thudding to the deck with the heavy, final crash of dead battleplate.

Bjorn howled his triumph, flinging his claws wide and spraying blood-flecks across the corridor. In his wake came his four surviving brothers, firing freely, locking down the surviving Alpha Legionnaires and driving them back.

Godsmote, Bjorn's second, chuckled something as he ran past, but Bjorn paid no attention.

'Slay them!' he roared. 'Slay them all!'

His body pumped with hyperadrenalin as they rampaged onwards. He knew they'd been lucky – surely not many enemy ships would carry so few legionnaires – but the ecstasy of combat washed away doubt. The remaining levels blurred past in a whirl of slaughter, and soon the blast doors to the command bridge loomed. Bjorn, Eunwald and Urth crouched down at the head of the leading corridor, training their bolters on the doors, while Godsmote sprinted up, laid breacher charges and raced back.

The detonation blew the corridor walls apart. Bjorn powered up through the flying debris, firing instinctively through the percussive explosions. His pack-brothers remained close on his heels, and the four of them crashed through the disintegrating lintel and into the chamber beyond.

The bridge was circular, with the command throne in the centre and terraces and servitor pits arranged concentrically. The crew had had plenty of warning, and a hail of las-fire and solid projectiles zinged towards them out of the drifting smoke.

Bjorn vaulted over a sensorium pillar and crunched into a three-metre-wide pit full of mortals. He sliced his way through them, punching his crackling claw into armour shells and the soft flesh beneath. Having cut his way down the length of the pit, he boosted clear at the far end and swung around for the next target.

By then Godsmote and Eunwald had driven a bloody swathe through the open centre. Urth's bolter-fire had downed snipers clustered in the high galleries, and he was now working his way along the terraced stations, ripping menials from their places and flinging them to the deck below.

Bjorn strode to the ship's commander, a mortal in Alpha Legion colours still occupying the tactical

throne, his face white with fear. The commander tried to raise his pistol to his forehead, but Bjorn grabbed it, hurled it aside and seized him by the throat, lifting him bodily from his seat.

The man's veins bulged, and his fingers scraped frantically along Bjorn's gauntlet. There had been a time when Bjorn might have demanded information, for something that might unlock the Alpha Legion's mysterious strategy, but no longer. Too many pack-brothers had died, and his hatred was pure.

'This we will do,' Bjorn hissed, 'to you all.'

He broke the man's neck, taking his time to squeeze the life out of him, before casting the corpse down and crushing the skull beneath his boot.

Then he raised his claw overhead, threw his bloody head back and howled again. The rest of his pack paused in their killing and did the same, and the entire bridge of the *Iota Malephelos* – gore-streaked, broken, strewn with the slain – echoed to the millennia-old war cries of unpitying Fenris.

The two fleets grappled truly then, locked in close-range combat across the whole width of the cloud tunnel. Ranks of boarding torpedoes hit their targets or were gunned down, leading to a rolling cascade of brilliant explosions along the leading flanks of the Alpha Legion's protective cordon.

The only response from the ranks of sapphire was a steadily more concentrated pattern of counter las-fire, scything through the twisting mass of battleships to strike at the capital vessels beyond. No Alpha Legion ship launched its own boarding parties, preferring to hit hard at a distance. The inner core of heavy battleships drew together slowly, buffered by burning rings of escorts.

Lord Gunn watched the carnage unfold from *Ragnarok*'s bridge, searching for signs that the high-risk tactic had paid off. A whole swathe of frigate-class Alpha Legion vessels had been disabled during the initial assault and was now drifting away from the battle-plane, their hulls riven with explosions. Slate-grey gunships plied a devastating trade among the remains, swooping close to rake them with strafing fire from battlecannons and heavy bolter mounts. Combined with the hammer-strike volleys from *Hrafnkel*'s long-range artillery, the Wolves' assault had left the Alpha Legion's outer fleet badly dented.

Still the enemy remained static. They made no attempt to protect their outer ranks, and let the first wave of frigates burn. Dominus-class warships drove up the centre, wreathed in flame along their massive sides, bolstered by fresh fire-support drawn from the rear of the Alpha Legion formation. Soon the volume of lance-strikes reached critical levels, sizzling through the void as if the beams could set it alight. With no room for flanking moves, the Wolves vessels began to turn clumsily, launching broadsides from their ventral batteries in an attempt to match firepower levels.

All across *Ragnarok*'s bridge, tactical reports flooded in, attended to by sprinting menials and relayed to the Legion's command points. Several boarding parties had closed in on their prey's bridges. Three light warships had already been taken, another six were contested and two more had been destroyed from within.

Slowly, Gunn began to realise the truth: the Alpha Legion commander, whoever he was, was happy to let his lesser ships die. The frigates were undermanned and poorly protected, bait for the infantry assault that he must have known would come. Nothing would deflect the onward advance of their capital warships, all of which were now training forward weapon arrays on the numerically inferior Wolves. Gunn's battleships could compete with them for a while, but not forever – so much had been thrown into the first wave, counting on the enemy not wishing to surrender its vessels and so compromising formation to save them.

He felt the beginnings of a foul sickness in his stomach. *Ragnarok* ploughed onwards, right into the heart of the cataclysm, all lances thundering. His shipmasters were piloting with skill, rolling and angling the guns to maximum effect. All around him, local space bumped and spiralled with the corpses of burned-out

hulls, but still he saw that it would not be enough.

They knew I would launch the gunships.

Ahead of him, less than a hundred kilometres out, the Alpha Legion's core group of line battleships was drawing up into lance-range. None of them had made any attempt to shield the frigates in their line of fire, and from the power build-ups detected it looked likely they were planning to fire straight through them. They were bound to hit some of their own, though they clearly calculated that many had already been boarded and crippled, thus limiting the loss to the whole fleet.

It was a wretched philosophy of war. Gunn checked the chronometer. Less than an hour of Russ's impossible deadline remained. Unless something changed quickly, his assault had no chance of breaking through.

'Increase fleet attack speeds!' he thundered, knowing how close he had already pushed them. 'Order all vessels to concentrate fire on the vanguard formation!'

It was not over yet. The two fleets were still grinding into one another like juggernauts, and a random warp-core breach or sudden loss of nerve could still turn the tide. All around them, lit up by the flares and bursts of las-fire, the boiling heart of Alaxxes pressed in, seething like the nine hearts of Hel. The Alpha Legion advanced before it, as cold and calm as machines.

'Break them!' Lord Gunn roared, his whole voice shaking with the wrath that burned up from his hearts, his gauntlets clenched tight. 'By the Allfather, by immortal Fenris, *break them!*'

The last of the defenders on *Iota Malephelos* were slaughtered, the control systems taken over and the whole place had begun to stink of still-hot blood.

Godsmote strode over to one of the sensorium consoles and looked down the list of incoming signals. '*Fekke*,' he swore, watching the pinpoints of light dance.

Bjorn looked out of the bridge's cracked real-view portal and saw the ruddy void beyond scored with explosions. Local space was clogged with the arcs and crackles of energy-release ripping into gargantuan void-craft with an eerie, deceptive silence. Even as he watched, the burning hulk of a strike cruiser bearing Alpha Legion markings tumbled across the visual field, its spine broken, saviour pods shedding from its underbelly like spawn released into the ocean.

'Status,' he demanded, moving over to Godsmote's position. Eunwald and Urth took up guard by the broken doorway, reloading their bolters.

'It is Hel,' said Godsmote, sounding impressed.

Bjorn only needed to glance at the tactical scope to see that he was right. Lord Gunn's manoeuvre already had no chance of success. The Alpha Legion cordon across the gas tunnel held firm, bolstered by their willingness to let their outer flanks be ripped away. Bjorn suddenly saw why their seizure of *Iota Malephelos* had been so easy: the enemy had husbanded their strength, allowing the Wolves to expend theirs on weaker outriders. Waves of boarding actions had taken out much of the protective aegis of smaller ships, but not enough to seriously expose the main formations of capital vessels.

Russvangum and *Ragnarok* had waded into the heart of the battle, their flanks blazing with broadsides, surrounded by the vast cordon of the Alaxxes blood-well's lethal blooms. *Hrafnkel* stood further back, launching barrage after barrage of torpedoes, hammering a path towards the enemy's heart in a cascade of smouldering, broken ship-spines, but it was all too slow, and all too blunt.

The Alpha Legion held the advantage. They could afford to lose two ships for every one Space Wolf vessel, and they played the game well. Lord Gunn had driven the Rout vanguard hard, knowing they needed to gouge a hole in the defensive wall and knock the supporting vessels out of position. He'd almost done it in one sector – *Ragnarok* had taken apart its nearest rival, a leviathan named the *Theta*, and

was continuing to power up the very heart of the battlesphere with all cannons spitting.

But several dozen Alpha Legion ships had the ident *Theta* – everything was repeated, referenced and double-signalled, which was another hateful mark of the XX – and it made no difference to the tactical situation. The Wolves had not established positional dominance, and were now at the mercy of greater ship concentrations. Beyond the darkening mass of this particular *Theta*, more battleships were already lumbering into position, supported by new wings of escorts. The Wolves could not muster anything like that discipline, and with their warriors spread thin in disruptive operations, the shackles of the Alaxxes tunnel edges prevented anything other than a frontal assault they were now ill-equipped to maintain.

'He will take us back,' muttered Bjorn, seeing the inevitability of it.

'We will never get a better chance,' said Godsmote.

He was right. If they failed to break out now, all that remained was to be driven deeper in, where the void corridors would narrow further, restricting their options down to nothing. They would be hounded, day after day, until death came for them in petty battles conducted at long range.

A poor way to die.

Bjorn strode over to the command throne, kicking aside the broken-necked corpse in the way. He summoned up trajectory readings for the frigate, overrode them and punched in new orders.

'This isn't over yet,' he growled, sweeping his helm lenses across the devastated bridge. 'Find a comms station. Prepare new allegiance codes for *Ragnarok*.'

The *Iota Malephelos* swung around hard, angling towards the closest Alpha Legion vessel, a frigate bearing the mark *Keta Rho*. The ship was fully occupied running up close to a Wolves formation led by the strike cruiser *Runeblade*, and its main lance was powering up for the strike. All around them, a thousand other battles were playing out, studded amid a maelstrom of flaring cannon discharge.

The weapon-control console on *Iota Malephelos* was almost exactly the same as the one on *Helridder*, bar the variant sigils. The irony of this war was its awful familiarity – they were fighting with the same weapons, in the same way, with the same commitment.

The *Keta Rho* swam into the real-view portal, still powering along the same trajectory towards its target, and Bjorn unlocked the codes he needed. Hundreds of metres below him, the broadside batteries slammed open, primed for firing.

'They have detected our course change,' reported Godsmote.

'Too late,' said Bjorn, activating the gunnery release.

Iota Malephelos continued on its trajectory, flying clumsily now that the secondary guidance crews were all dead, and launched its full payload at the *Keta Rho*. The space around it sizzled with coruscation as the guns all fired at once, hurling a storm of ship-killing shells across the narrowing gap between them. *Keta Rho* attempted evasive action at the last moment, but it was too close to escape. In a series of sharp impacts, its facing flank was peppered with cannon bursts, shattering the void shields and penetrating down to the hull plates below.

Immediately, other Alpha Legion vessels started to home in on *Iota Malephelos*'s position, now alive to the switch of allegiance.

'Come about for another pass,' said Bjorn, watching the tactical display fill with enemy signals and wondering how long they'd last.

Godsmote made the adjustments just as the chronometer hit the two-hour mark. Almost instantly, the fallback order came over the fleet comm.

Lord Gunn had had enough – even he wouldn't see the fleet ripped apart to salvage his pride. All across the battlesphere, assault rams, boarding boats and gunships would already be streaking back to their hangars, covered by whatever escorts had survived the initial melee.

The *Keta Rho* still lived, and was turning to bring its own weapons to bear. Six other enemy ships were hurrying up from the starboard nadir, all zeroing in on the *Iota Malephelos*.

'What are your orders?' asked Godsmote.

Bjorn didn't need to look at the tactical displays to know what he needed to do. It made him sick to contemplate it, but there were no alternatives.

'Broadcast the new ident,' he snarled, tasting – again – the pain of retreat. 'Then full-burn, back with the rest.'

Gunn remained at the helm of *Ragnarok*, glaring grimly out across the bridge of the enormous battleship. Below him, ranked across the dozens of terraces radiating out from the command dais, hundreds of mortals and servitors struggled to enact the withdrawal command without getting the ship destroyed. Alpha Legion vessels streaked in from every direction, now at full velocity, aiming to pierce the outer defensive shell and get in among the more damaged warships.

'Maintain the perimeter,' warned Gunn, flagging up a weakness in the sector held by *Fenrysavar*. 'Get the gunships landed. *Skítja*, we need to pull those torpedoes *out*.'

The entire Wolves fleet was contracting, pulling in on itself and swivelling into retreat trajectories. It was a dangerous time, risking exposing the battleships' flanks before they could power up to full speed again. Some captured vessels were responding to the command, but not enough to replace those lost in the fury of the counter-assault. The claustrophobic dimensions of the gas tunnel hindered them further, since straying into its margins would be as catastrophic as a full lance-battery strike, so everything was tight, constricted by the volume of incoming fire as well as the collapsing dimensions of the battlesphere.

Gunn glanced down at the full-range hololith, noting the positions of the battleships. The *Hrafnkel* had remained in the centre of the formation, somehow eking out even more ranged support from its ravaged gun batteries; it was the linchpin around which the rest of the fleet was turning.

He stared at the flickering image before him, feeling a kind of hatred for it. The primarch was aboard that ship, lurking in his chambers, lost in a surly indifference. He should have been *here*, leading the charge. Lord Gunn was a veteran of centuries of warfare, but was under no illusions about the disparity in shipmastery between the two of them. Perhaps Russ could have done it. He'd have summoned up something, dragged out from the depths and hurled into the enemy's treacherous faces. That was what he was *for* – to do the impossible, to haul the Legion out of the mire and set it loping back into the hunt.

'Lord, the fleet is pulling clear,' reported *Ragnarok*'s navigation master. 'Trajectory has been set – are we joining them?'

Even as the man spoke, fresh shudders radiated up from *Ragnarok*'s bowels. More impacts followed – solid rounds, torpedoes, las-bursts, all raking along shield-arcs that were already close to failing. If Gunn closed his eyes he could feel the ship's agony, cut with a thousand wounds and bleeding into the vacuum.

He could order a final charge. He could send the battleship surging into the oncoming Alpha Legion vanguard, destroying as much of it as he could before they snapped the ship's neck at last. They might even board before the end, and he'd die like a warrior, the corpses of his enemies piled high around him on the command bridge.

Then I would slay with a smile, he thought.

'Pull away,' Gunn ordered, forcing the words out. 'Cover the retreat. Maintain ordnance barrage. We will be the last to fall back.'

Then he turned, his huge shoulders a fraction lower, and looked away from the forward oculus, sickened by it.

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